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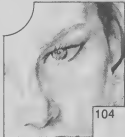
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Asimov's SCIENCE FICTION



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Stories from Asimov's have won nineteen Hugos and twenty-one Nebula Awards, and our editors have received eight Hugo Awards for Best Editor. Asimov's was also the 1992 recipient of the Locus Award for Best Magazine.

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GUEST EDITORIAL

A FAREWELL TO FANTASY

by Michael Swanwick

Some changes are so large and yet gradual, so all-encompassing, that they can escape attention altogether. Continental drift is a good example. One day all the protosaurs are sitting around companionably enough in Gondwanaland. A handful of millions of years later, a rift valley nobody ever paid any particular attention to has widened into the Atlantic Ocean and suddenly the difference between South America and Africa is of more than statistical import. It's doubtful that many individual organisms were much discomforted by the event, but the separation of continents was one of the great engines for the individuation of species. It changed everything.

It hasn't drawn much comment, but science fiction is currently undergoing a major change. It is one of the pivotal events in the history of the genre and it is going on now.

Fantasy is separating out.

The evidence is everywhere. It's in the growing number of fantasy fans who pride themselves in never reading a word of science fiction. It's in the increasing tendency for bookstores to display science fiction and fantasy in separate racks.

It's in the recent decision of a notoriously conservative writers' group to recognize a long-standing fact of existence and change its name to (*italics mine*) the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America. Most importantly, fantasy is now being bought, sold, and marketed not as science fiction but as fantasy, something that until recent decades simply did not happen.

To understand what a radical departure from What Was this is, it helps to look at my own personal experience.

I was in my junior year at Winooski High School, Vermont, when my big sister Patty, then in nursing school, sent home a box of paperbacks she had read and no longer wanted. Hidden in that box, like a hand grenade in a candy bin, was a book I'd never heard of. It looked like any other book. Nothing about it hinted that it was about to change my life forever. There was nothing to suggest that overnight it would set me on the long, long road to becoming a professional writer. But it did.

I remember that my load of homework that night was heavy. It was almost midnight by the time I

finished it. Weary and tense, I grabbed a book at random from the box, thinking to read a few pages, a chapter at most, to help unwind before going to sleep.

The book was *The Fellowship of the Ring*, volume one of J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy.

This was something unlike anything I had ever read before. It seized hold of me and would not let go. After the first hour I stopped looking for a convenient stopping-place and concentrated on finishing the thing in time for school. I read madly, feverishly. I skipped breakfast and stumbled through the fields and narrow streets of Winooski with the book open in my hand, reading. And by God I managed to finish it just two minutes before my first class!

I was hooked.

Over the next couple of years I hunted down not only the concluding volumes of Tolkien's trilogy, but also every work of fantasy then in print. I read E. R. Eddison's wonderful *Memison* books, Mervyn Peake's *Gormenghast* and *Titus Groan*, James Branch Cabell's sarcastic masterpieces, Robert E. Howard's distinctly uneven Conan books, and. . . .

And that was about it. There simply wasn't much fantasy in print in the nineteen-sixties. Hard as it is to imagine now, most publishers knew darned good and well that fantasy didn't sell and so they didn't publish any. I had an appetite I couldn't feed. In desperation I turned to science fiction. Sci-

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ence fiction, you see, had a similar flavor to fantasy—not the same, but close enough. It was the best available substitute for the real thing.

A funny thing happened to me, though. Little by little my loyalties shifted away from fantasy to SF. Nowadays, though I write both, I think of myself as a science fiction writer who also writes fantasy. Exactly the opposite of what I would have predicted a quarter-century ago.

What I didn't know at the time was that I had just recapitulated as a reader a voyage that had already been made by almost every fantasy writer then alive. This was a time when published fantasy was as rare as hippogriffs, a species driven close to the edge of extinction. To survive, fantasists had to disguise their works as something else. As historical novels, say, or Arthuriana, or—with the aid of a quickly forgotten spaceport—as science fiction. Of all available refuges, SF was the most hospitable and offered the warmest welcome.

So they came, wolves in scientists' smocks, into the fold. It was raining outside, and science fiction offered shelter.

One day it stopped raining. With the fantasy market flourishing, there was no longer the need for anyone to pretend. By dribs and drabs, and then in droves and hordes, the fantasists began leaving.

Good riddance, some will say. Those who love their SF straight

and have never cottoned to the unmanly influence of fantasy may even think of this exodus as a boon to the field.

But stop and look at a few names: Leigh Brackett, Marion Zimmer Bradley, Avram Davidson, Ursula K. Le Guin, Fritz Leiber, Andre Norton, Jack Vance. . . . These are all fantasists by temperament forced into the tent by the deluge. They've all written works that are unquestionably science fiction and, more than that, works that have had serious impact on what science fiction is today.

It's possible to look at the history of the field and speculate how different it would look had today's market for fantasy always existed. Would Poul Anderson have ever turned to science fiction had there been an early audience for his fantasy? Maybe not. How about Michael Moorcock? At least one master fantasist, L. Sprague de Camp, on the other hand, was an engineer; he would probably have worked both genres in any case. A good parlor game could be made of this, in fact—guessing who would and wouldn't have wound up in science fiction, given the chance to do otherwise.

Beyond those already mentioned are the writers who grew up reading this genre in which fantasy and science fiction were inextricably mingled and took their influences where they could, without regard for genre or category. People like Gene Wolfe, Keith Roberts, Karen Joy Fowler, Ian Watson, Terry Bis-

son, M. John Harrison, Tanith Lee, Tim Powers, Elizabeth Hand, Ian R. MacLeod, Paul Park, Nancy Kress, Lucius Shepard, and Howard Waldrop—I threw this list together almost at random, and I could easily stretch it out into the hundreds, for most of us today are writing hybrid-genre fiction. SF has been indelibly altered by its proximity to fantasy, and vice versa. The past fifty or so years have been an incredibly productive symbiosis between the two genres.

Now it's over.

This is not to say that readers are going to wake up tomorrow to find half their favorite writers have flown the coop. Those fantasists who also write SF may well continue to do so, though less frequently than before. There will still be writers working both sides of the rift. (Me, for one. I've just finished a fantasy novel and have no intention whatsoever of leaving science fiction.) But the gap that divides the genre is widening. The continents are breaking apart.

All the above is prologue to what I actually want to say, necessary background for what follows. Before I say it, I must explain that I

claim no special right to speak on behalf of the entire genre of science fiction. But it's something that *should* be said, and since nobody else has stepped forward, I might as well.

Here it is:

The people who are leaving are not just guests. They are the writers and their heirs who have shaped the field. They came in for shelter but they leave as family. They are us, and their going leaves those who remain the poorer for their loss.

What can be done about this? Nothing.

Except to say: Goodbye. Thanks for the wonderful stories. Thanks for all you've taught us. You guys were the greatest.

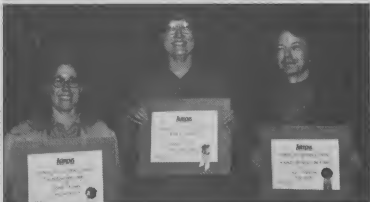
Don't be strangers. ●

Michael Swanwick's last novel, the Nebula-Award winning Stations of the Tide, was a hard science fiction tale. His newest novel, The Iron Dragon's Daughter, is a fantasy. The English edition of the latter book will be published by Millennium in October, and the American edition is forthcoming from AvoNova.

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7th ANNUAL READERS' AWARD RESULTS

Photo credit: Jane Jewell



From left to right: Janet Kagan, Connie Willis, and Ace G. Pilkington.

Well, the readers have spoken, and that means that once again it's time to tell you the winners of *Asimov's Science Fiction's* Seventh Annual Readers' Award poll. As always, these were *your* choices, the stories and artwork and poetry that *you*—the readers—liked best out of all the stuff we published in 1992. The readers were the only judges for this particular award—no juries, no experts—and, once again, it's intriguing to compare results with the Hugo and Nebula ballots, as well as with the readers' polls conducted by *Locus* and *SF Chronicle*... as always, there were some fascinating similarities, but also some equally fascinating differences. This year's winners, and runners-up, were:

NOVELLA

1. **CLEON THE EMPEROR, ISAAC ASIMOV (tie)**
1. **BARNACLE BILL THE SPACER, LUCIUS SHEPARD (tie)**
2. Synthesis, Mary Rosenblum
3. Outnumbering the Dead, Frederik Pohl
4. Grownups, Ian R. MacLeod
5. Griffin's Egg, Michael Swanwick
6. Her Girl Friday, John Varley
7. Crux Gammata, J.R. Dunn
8. Protection, Maureen F. McHugh
9. Gypsy Trade, R. Garcia y Robertson
10. The Virgin and the Dinosaur, R. Garcia y Robertson

NOVELETTE

- 1. THE NUTCRACKER COUP, JANET KAGAN**
2. Breakfast Cereal Killers, R. Garcia y Robertson (tie)
2. Into Darkness, Greg Egan (tie)
3. Danny Goes to Mars, Pamela Sargent
4. In the Presence of Mine Enemies, Harry Turtledove
5. Vanilla Dunk, Jonathan Lethem
6. Dust, Greg Egan
7. Render Unto Caesar, Maureen F. McHugh
8. Impact Parameter, Geoffrey A. Landis
9. Song of a Dry River, Mike Resnick (tie)
9. Deep Safari, Charles Sheffield (tie)
10. Sugar's Blues, Allen Steele

SHORT STORY

- 1. EVEN THE QUEEN, CONNIE WILLIS**
2. All Vows, Esther M. Friesner
3. The Mountain to Mohammed, Nancy Kress
4. Storm Trooper, Lawrence Watt-Evans
5. Just Drive, She Said, Richard Paul Russo
6. Alfred, Lisa Goldstein
7. The Critic on the Hearth, Isaac Asimov (tie)
7. Auld Lang Boom, Jack McDevitt (tie)
8. Persephone, Kathe Koja (tie)
8. Memories of the Flying Ball Bike Shop, Garry Kilworth (tie)
9. The Heaven Tree, Jamil Nasir (tie)
9. The Arbitrary Placement of Walls, Martha Soukup (tie)
10. The Walk, Greg Egan

BEST POEM

- 1. A ROBOT'S FAREWELL TO THE MASTER,
ACE G. PILKINGTON**
2. The Last Nightfall, Ashley J. Hastings
3. Amazon, Roger Dutcher
4. Planet: For Sale, Amy Cubellis
5. The Witch's Declaration of Love for Dorothy, Lawrence Person
6. The Two Cultures: for John Swope, James Patrick Kelly
7. In Praise of Timelessness, Bruce Boston
8. Christmas Day, Give or Take a Week, Lawrence Schimel
9. Au, Terry McGarry
10. Not, Tom Disch (tie)
10. Head, Steve Rasnic Tem (tie)

BEST COVER ARTIST

1. **BOB EGGLETON**
2. Michael Whelan
3. Nicholas Jainschigg (tie)
3. Gary Freeman (tie)
4. Michael Carroll
5. Bob Walters
6. David Cherry
7. Hisaki Yasuda
8. E.T. Steadman
9. Mark Harrison
10. Steve Cavallo

BEST INTERIOR ARTIST

1. **GARY FREEMAN**
2. Steve Cavallo
3. Bob Walters
4. Laura Lakey
5. Laurie Harden
6. Janet Aulisio
7. Anthony Bari
8. Alan M. Clark
9. John Johnson
10. David Cherry (tie)
10. Nicholas Jainschigg (tie)
10. Pat Morrissey (tie)

Both our Readers' Awards and *Analog's* Analytical Laboratory Awards were presented on April 17, 1993 at the Holiday Inn Crowne Plaza in New Orleans, Louisiana, during a breakfast hosted by Publisher Christoph Haas-Heye. After breakfast (*during* which the Yankees present explored the mysteries of Grits with varying degrees of enthusiasm and trepidation), the awards were presented in a brief ceremony, each winner receiving a cash award and a certificate. Of the *Asimov's* winners, Connie Willis, Janet Kagan, and Ace G. Pilkington were on hand to receive their awards in person; other guests at the award breakfast included Charles N. Brown, publisher of *Locus*, Cordelia Willis, and several of the Analytical Laboratory winners. Later on that night, everyone assembled for the annual Nebula Award Banquet, which was also held at the Holiday Inn Crowne Plaza. At the Banquet, probably unique in SFWA history for including rubber cockroaches as table settings, stories from *Asimov's* took home two of the prizes, with Connie Willis winning for Best Short Story with "Even the Queen," and Pamela Sargent winning for Best Novelette with "Danny Goes to Mars." After the Banquet, the hardier souls among the party hit Bourbon Street for an evening of listening to jazz and blues music, eating Red Beans and Rice, and drinking—not necessarily in that order. Some *still* haven't come back!

—Gardner Dozois



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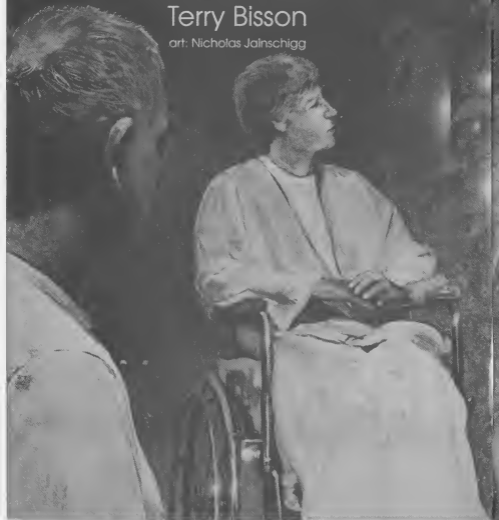
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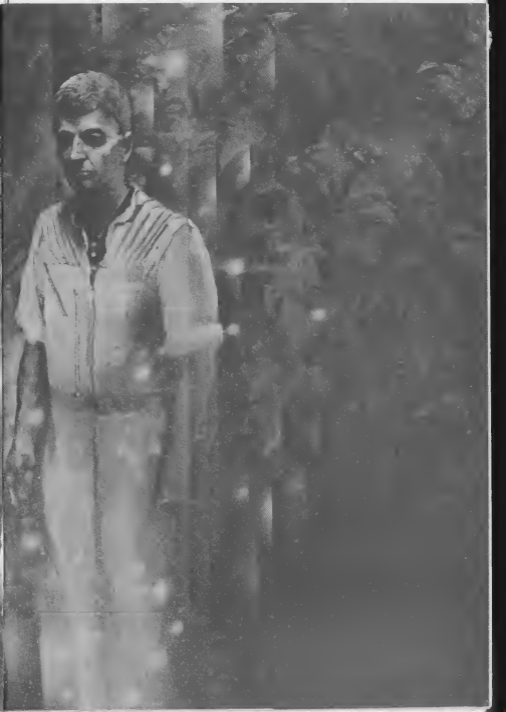
Terry Bisson's science fiction collection *Bears Discover Fire & Other Stories*, will be out soon from Tor. The book's title selection won the Hugo, the Nebula, and our own Annual Readers' Award for best short story. Mr. Bisson returns to our pages with a mysterious SF tale about what...

THE SHADOW KNOWS

Terry Bisson

art: Nicholas Jainschigg





"If a lion could talk, we couldn't understand it."

—Wittgenstein

ONE

When it comes to property, even old folks move fast. Edwards hadn't been abandoned for more than a year before the snowbirds began moving in. We turned the pride of the U.S. space program into a trailer park in six months, with Airstreams and Winneys parked on the slabs that had once held hangars and barracks.

I was considered sort of the unofficial mayor, since I had served in and out (or up and down, as earthsiders put it) of Edwards for some twenty years before being forced into retirement exactly six days short of ten years before the base itself was budget-cut out of existence by a bankrupt government. I knew where the septic tanks and waterlines had been; I knew where the electrical lines and roads were buried under the blowing sand. And since I had been in maintenance, I knew how to splice up the phone lines and even pirate a little electric from the LA-to-Vegas trunk. Though I didn't know everybody in Slab City, just about everybody knew me.

So when a bald-headed dude in a two-piece suit started going door to door asking for Captain Bewley, folks knew who he was looking for. "You must mean the Colonel," they would say. (I had never been very precise about rank.) Everybody knew I had been what the old-timers called an "astronaut," but nobody knew I had been a lunie, except for a couple of old girlfriends to whom I had shown the kind of tricks you learn in three years at .16g, but that's another and more, well, intimate story altogether.

This story, which also has its intimate aspects, starts with a knock at the door of my ancient but not exactly venerable 2009 Road Lord.

"Captain Bewley, probably you don't remember me, but I was junior day officer when you were number two on maintenance operations at Houbolt—"

"On the farside of the Moon. Flight Lieutenant J.B. 'Here's Johnny' Carson. How could I forget one of the most—" (I searched for a word: what's a polite synonym for forgettable?) "—agreeable young lunies in the Service. No longer quite so young. And now a civilian, I see."

"Not exactly, sir," he said.

"Not 'sir' anymore," I said. "You would probably outrank me by now, and I'm retired anyway. Just call me Colonel Mayor."

He didn't get the joke—Here's Johnny never got the joke, unless he was the one making it; he just stood there looking uncomfortable. Then

I realized he was anxious to get in out of the UV, and that I was being a poor host.

"And come on in," I said. I put aside the radio controlled model I was building, or rather, fixing, for one of my unofficial grandsons who couldn't seem to get the hang of landing. I don't have any grandkids, or kids, of my own. A career in space, or "in the out" as we used to say, has its down side.

"I see you've maintained an interest in flight," Here's Johnny said. "That makes my job easier."

That was clearly my cue, and since we lunies never saw much use in beating around the bush (there being no bushes on the Moon) I decided to let Here's Johnny off the hook. Or is that mixing metaphors? There are no metaphors on the Moon, either. Everything there is what it is.

Anyway, accomodatingly, I said, "Your job, which is—"

"I'm now working for the UN, Captain Bewley," he said. "They took over the Service, you know. Even though I'm out of uniform, I'm here on official business. Incognito. To offer you an assignment."

"An assignment? At my age? The Service threw me out ten years ago because I was too old!"

"It's a temporary assignment," he said. "A month, two months at most. But it means accepting a new commission, so they can give you clearance, since the whole project is Top Secret."

I could hear the caps on the T and the S. I suppose I was supposed to be impressed. I suppose I might have been, fifty years before.

"They're talking about a promotion to major, with increased retirement and medical benefits," said Here's Johnny.

"That would be a de facto demotion, since everybody here calls me Colonel already," I said. "Nothing personal, Here's Johnny, but you wasted a trip. I already have enough medical and retirement for my old bones. What's a little extra brass to a seventy-six-year old with no dependents and few vices?"

"What about space pay?"

"Space pay?"

Here's Johnny smiled, and I realized he had been beating around the bush the whole time, and enjoying it. "They want to send you back to the Moon, Captain Bewley."

In the thrillers of the last century, when you are recruited for a top secret international operation (and this one turned out to be not just international but interplanetary; even interstellar—hell, intergalactic), they send a Lear Jet with no running lights to pick you up at an unmarked airport and whisk you to an unnamed Caribbean island, where

you meet with the well-dressed and ruthless dudes who run the world from behind the scenes.

In real life, in the 2030s at least, you fly coach to Newark.

I knew that Here's Johnny couldn't tell me what was going on, at least until I had been sworn in, so on the way back East we just shot the bull and caught up on old times. We hadn't been friends in the Service—there was age and rank and temperament between us—but time has a way of smoothing out those wrinkles. Most of my old friends were dead; most of his were in civilian life, working for one of the French and Indian firms that serviced the network of communications and weather satellites that were the legacy of the last century's space programs. The Service Here's Johnny and I knew had been cut down to a Coast Guard-type outfit running an orbital rescue shuttle and maintaining the lunar asteroid-watch base I had helped build, Houbolt.

"I was lucky enough to draw Houbolt," Here's Johnny said, "or I would probably have retired myself three years ago, at fifty."

I winced. Even the kids were getting old.

We took a cab straight through the Lincoln/Midtown Tunnel to the UN building in Queens, where I was re-commissioned as a major in the Space Service by a bored lady in a magenta uniform. My new papers specified that when I retired again in sixty days I would draw a major's pension plus augmented medical with a full dental plan.

This was handsome treatment indeed, since I still had several teeth left. I was impressed; and also puzzled. "Okay, Here's Johnny," I said as we walked out into the perfect October sunlight (at my age you notice fall more than spring): "Let's have it. What's the deal? What's going on?"

He handed me a room chit for a midtown hotel (the Service had never been able to afford Queens) and a ticket on the first flight out for Reykjavik the next morning; but he held onto a brown envelope with my name scrawled on it.

"I have your orders in this envelope," he said. "They explain everything. The problem is, well—once I give them to you I'm supposed to stay by your side until I put you on the plane tomorrow morning."

"And you have a girlfriend."

"I figured you might."

So I did. An old girlfriend. At my age, all your girlfriends are old.

New York is supposed to be one of the dirtiest cities in the world; it is certainly the noisiest. Luckily I like noise and like most old people, need little sleep. Here's Johnny must have needed more; he was late. He met me at the Icelandic gate at Reagan International only minutes before

my flight's last boarding call and handed me the brown envelope with my name on it.

"You're not supposed to open it until you're on the plane, Captain," he said. "I mean, Major."

"Not so fast," I said, grabbing his wrist. "You got me into this. You must know something about it."

Here's Johnny lowered his voice and looked from side to side; like most lunies he loved secrets. "You know Zippe-Buisson, the French firm that cleans up orbital trash?" he said. "A few months ago they noticed a new blip in medium high earth. There weren't any lost sats on the db; it was too big to be a dropped wrench and too small to be a shuttle tank."

Ding, went the door. I backed into the gate and held it open with one foot. "Go on," I said.

"Remember *Voyager*, the interstellar probe sent out in the 1970s? It carried a disk with digital maps of earth and pictures of humans, even music. Mozart and what's-his-name—"

Ding ding, went the door. "I remember the joke. 'Send more Chuck Berry,'" I said. "But you're changing the subject."

No, he wasn't. Just as the door started to close and I had to jump through, Here's Johnny called out: "*Voyager* is back. With a passenger."

The sealed orders, which I opened on the plane, didn't add much to what Here's Johnny had told me. I was officially assigned to the UN's SETI (Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence) Commission, E Team, temporarily stationed at Houbolt, Luna. That was interesting, since Houbolt had been cut back to robot operation before my retirement, and hadn't housed anybody (that I knew of) for almost fifteen years.

I was to proceed to Reykjavik for my meds; I was to communicate with no one about my destination or my assignment. Period. There was no indication what the E Team was (although I had of course been given a clue), or what my role in it was to be. Or why I had been chosen.

Reykjavik is supposed to be one of the cleanest cities in the world. It is certainly one of the quietest. I spent the afternoon and most of the evening getting medical tests in a sparkling new hospital wing, where it seemed I was the only patient. The doctors seemed less worried about my physical condition than my brain, blood, and bone status. I'm no medical expert, but I can recognize a cancer scan when I am subjected to one.

In between tests I met my new boss, the head of SETI's E Team, by videophone from Luna. She was a heavy-set fifty-ish woman with perfect teeth (now that I had my dental plan, I was noticing teeth again), short blond hair, piercing blue eyes, and a barely perceptible Scandinavian

accent. She introduced herself as Dr. Sunda Hvarlgen and said: "Welcome to Reykjavik, Major. I understand you are part of Houbolt's history. I hope they are treating you well in my home town."

"The films in the waiting room aren't bad," I said. "I watched *ET* twice."

"I promise an official briefing when you get to Houbolt. I just wanted to welcome you to the E team."

"Does this mean I passed my medicals?"

She rang off impatiently and it struck me as I hung up that the whole purpose of the call had been to get a look at me.

They finished with me at nine P.M. The next morning at seven, I was loaded into a fat-tired van and taken twelve miles north on a paved highway, then east on a track across a lava field. I was the only passenger. The driver was a descendant (or so he said) of Huggard the Grasping, one of the original lost settlers of Newfoundland. After an hour we passed through the gates of an abandoned air base. Huggard pointed to a small lava ridge with sharp peaks like teeth; behind it I noticed a single silver tooth, even sharper than the rest. It was the nose cone of an Ariane-Daewoo IV.

The Commission had given up the advantages of an equatorial launch in order to preserve the secrecy of the project; this meant that the burn was almost twenty-eight minutes long. I didn't mind. I hadn't been off-planet in eleven years, and the press of six gravities was like an old lover holding me in her arms again. And the curve of the planet below—well, if I had been a sentimental man, I would have cried. But sentiment is for middle age, just as romance is for youth. Old age, like war, has colder feelings; it is, after all, a struggle to the death.

High Orbital was lighted and looked bustling from approach, which surprised me; the station had been shut down years ago except for fueling and docking use. We didn't go inside; just used the universal airlock for transfer to the lunar shuttle, the dirty but reliable old *Diana* in which I had made so many trips. She was officially Here's Johnny's command, but he was on rotation: presumably his reward for bringing me in alive.

When we old folks forget how decrepit and uninteresting we are, we can count on the young to remind us by ignoring us. The three-person crew of the *Diana* kept to themselves and spoke only Russo-Japanese. It made for a lonely day and a half, but I didn't mind. The trip to the Moon is one of the loveliest there is. You're leaving one ball of water and heading for another of rock, and there's always a view.

Since the crew didn't know I speak (or at least understand) a little R-J, I got my first clue as to what my assignment might be. I overheard two of them speculating about "ET" (a name that is the same in every

language) and one said: "Who would have thought the thing would only relate to old folks?"

That night I slept like a baby. I woke up only once, when we crossed over what we lunies used to call Wolf Creek Pass—the top of the Earth's (relatively) long, steep gravitational well, and the beginning of the short, shallow slope to the Moon. In zero g there's no way this transition can be felt; yet I awoke, knowing exactly (even after eleven years) where I was.

I was on my way back to the Moon.

Situated on the farside of the Moon, facing always away from the Earth, Houbolt lies open to the Universe. In a more imaginative, more intelligent, more spirited age it would be a deep-space optical observatory, or at least a monastery. In our petty, penny-pinching, paranoid century it is used only as a semi-automated Near-Earth-Object or asteroid early-warning station. It wouldn't have been kept open at all if it were not for the near-miss of NEO 2201 Oljato back in '14, which had pried loose UN funds as only stark terror will.

Houbolt lies near the center of the farside's great Korolev crater, on a gray regolith plain ringed by jagged mountains unsmoothed by water, wind or ice; as sheer as the lava sills of Iceland but miles instead of meters high; fantastic enough to remind you over and over, with every glance, that they are made of Moon, not Earth; and that you are in their realm; and that it is not a realm of living things.

I loved it. I had helped build and then maintain the base for four years, so I knew it well. In fact, on seeing that barren landscape again, in which life is neither a promise nor a memory, not even a rumor, I realized why I had stayed in the desert after retirement and not gone back to Tennessee, even though I still had people there. Tennessee is too damn green.

Houbolt is laid out like a starfish, with five small peripheral domes (named for the four winds, plus Other) all connected by forty-meter tubes to the larger central dome known as Grand Central. Hvarlgen met me at the airlock in South, which was still the shop and maintenance dome. I felt at home right away.

I was a little surprised to see that she was in a wheelchair; other than that, she looked the same as on the screen. The blue eyes were even bluer here on the blueless Moon.

"Welcome to Houbolt," she said as we shook hands. "Or back, maybe I should say. Didn't South here used to be your office?" The Moon with its .16g has always drawn more than its share of 'capped, and I could tell by the way she spun the chair around and ran it tilted back on two wheels that it was just right for her. I followed her down the tube toward Grand Central.

I had been afraid Houbolt might have fallen into ruin, like High Orbital, but it was newly painted and the air smelled fresh. Grand Central was bright and cheerful. Hvarlgen's team of lunies had put in a few spots of color, but they hadn't overdone it. All of them were young, in bright yellow tunics. When Hvarlgen introduced me as one of the pioneers of Houbolt, none of them blinked at my name, even though it was one of twenty-two on a plaque just inside the main airlock. I wasn't surprised. The Service is like a mold, an organism with immortality but no memory.

A young lunie showed me to my windowless pie-shaped "wedgie" in North. A loose orange tunic with a SETI patch lay folded on the hammock. But I wasn't about to put on Hvarlgen's uniform until I learned what she was doing.

I found her back in Grand Central waiting by the coffee machine, a giant Russian apparatus that reflected our faces like a funhouse mirror. I was surprised to see myself. When you get to a certain age you stop looking in mirrors.

A hand drawn poster over the machine read $D = 118$.

"Hours until the *Diana* returns," Hvarlgen said. "The lunies see this as a hardship assignment, surprisingly enough. They're only used to being here a day or two at a time."

"You promised a briefing," I said.

"I did." She drew me a coffee and pointed out a seat. "I assume, since gossip is still the fuel of the Service, that in spite of our best efforts you have managed to learn something about our project here." She scowled. "If you haven't, you'd be too dumb to work with."

"There was a rumor," I said. "About an ET."

"An AO," she corrected. "At this point it's classified only as an Anomalous Object. Even though it's not in fact an object. More like an idea for an object. If my work—our work—is successful and we make contact, it will be upgraded to an ET. It was found in Earth orbit some sixteen days ago."

I was impressed. Here's Johnny hadn't told me how quickly all this had been pulled together. "You all move fast," I said.

She nodded. "What else did you hear?"

"*Voyager*," I said. "'Send more Chuck Berry.'"

"*Voyager II*, actually. Circa 1977. Which left the heliosphere in 1991, becoming the first human-made object to enter interstellar space. Last month, more than fifty years after its launch, it was found in high Earth orbit with its batteries discharged, its nuclears dead, seemingly derelict. Space junk. How long it had been there, who or what returned it, and why—we still don't know. As it was brought into lock aboard the recovery vessel, the *Jean Genet*, what had appeared to be a shadow attached itself to one of the crew, one Hector Mersault, apparently while they were

unsuited. They didn't notice at first, until they found Mersault sitting in the airlock, half undressed and dazed, as if he had just come out from under anesthesia. He was holding his helmet and the shadow was pooled in it; apparently our AO likes small spaces, like a cat."

"Likes?"

"We allow ourselves certain anthropomorphisms, Major. We will correct for them later. If necessary. More coffee?"

While she poured us both another cup, I looked around the room; but with lunies it's hard to tell European from Asian, male from female.

"So where's this Mersault?" I asked. "Is he here?"

"Not exactly," Hvarlgen said. "He walked out of an airlock the next morning. But our friend the AO is still with us. Come. I'll show you."

We drained our coffee and I followed Hvarlgen down the tube toward the periphery dome known as Other. She ran with her chair tilted back, so that her front wheels were almost a foot off the floor; I was to learn that this angle of elevation reflected her mood. Other was divided into two semi-hemi-spherical rooms used to grow the environmental that we'd called "weed & bean." There was a small storage shed between the two rooms. We headed straight for the shed. A lunie with a ceremonial (I hoped) wiregun unlocked the door and let us into a gray closed wedgie, small as a prison cell. The door closed behind us. The room was empty except for a plastic chair facing a waist-high shelf, on which sat a clear glass bowl, like a fishbowl, in which was—

Well, a shadow.

It was about the size of a keyboard or a cantaloupe. It was hard to look at; it was sort of there and sort of not there. When I looked to one side, the bowl looked empty; whatever was (or wasn't) in it, didn't register on my peripheral vision.

"Our bio teams have been over it," Hvarlgen said. "It does not register on any instruments. It can't be touched, weighed, or measured in any way, not even an electrical charge. It's not even *not* there. As far as I can guess, it's some kind of anti-particle soup. Don't ask me how our eyes can see it. I think they just see the *isn't* of it, if you know what I mean."

I nodded even though I didn't.

"It doesn't show up on video; but I am hoping it will register on analog."

"Analog?"

"Chemical. We're filming it." Hvarlgen pointed to a gunlike object jury-rigged to one wall, which whirred and followed her hand, then aimed back at the bowl. "I had this antique shipped up especially for the job. Everything our AO does is captured on film, twenty-four hours a day."

"Film!" I said. I was impressed again. "So what exactly does it do?"

"Sits there in the bowl. That's the problem. It refuses to—but is 'refuse'

too anthropomorphic a word for you? Let me start over. As far as we can tell, it will only interact with living tissue."

A shiver went through me. Living tissue? That was me, for a few more years anyway, and I was beginning to understand, or at least suspect, why I was here. But why me? "What exactly do you mean by 'interact'?" I asked.

Hvarlgen scowled. "Don't look so worried," she said. "In spite of what happened to Mersault, this is no suicide assignment. Let's go get another cup of coffee, and I'll explain."

We left the AO to its bowl, and the lunie with the wiregun to lock up. Back at Grand Central, Hvarlgen poured two more cups of thick, lunar coffee. I was beginning to see her as a wheeled device that ran on the stuff.

"SETI was set up in the middle of the last century," she said. "In a sense, *Voyager* was part of the program. NASA took it over toward the end of the century and changed the name, but the idea was the same. They were searching for evidence of intelligent life, the assumption being that actual communication over such vast distances would be impossible. Contact was considered even more remote. But in the event that it did occur, it was assumed that it probably would not be a 'take me to your leader' sort of thing, a spaceship landing in London or Peking; that it would be more complicated than that, and that plenty of room for human sensitivity and intuition should be built into the system. Some flexibility. So SETI's directors set up the E (for 'Elliot') Team which would swing into operation on first contact and operate, for twenty-one days only, in strictest secrecy. No press, no politics. No grownups, if you will. It would be run by a single person instead of a committee; a humanist rather than a scientist."

"A woman rather than a man?"

"That's just been the luck of the draw. You'll be surprised to learn how it has backfired in this case." Hvarlgen scowled again. "Anyway, by the time I got the job, the E Team was more of a sop thrown to the soft sciences than a working position. A brief orientation, a stipend and a beeper that was never expected to beep. But the mechanisms were still in place. I was visiting psychology professor at UC Davis, on leave from Reykjavik U, when I got the call—within hours of the *Jean Genet* incident. I was already on my way up to High Orbital when Mersault died. Or killed himself."

"Or was killed," I offered.

"Whatever. We'll get into that later. At any rate, I exercised the extraordinary authority which the UN had granted the E Team—figuring

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it would never be used, I'm sure—and had this whole operation set up here at Houbolt."

"Because you didn't want to bring the AO down to Earth."

"It didn't seem like a good idea, at least until we knew what we were dealing with. And High Orbital was in such bad shape, plus it's hard to find people who can tolerate zero g for long periods. I know the Moon since I did my doctoral project here. So here we are. Everything that has happened since Mersault's death has been my decision. My E Team mandate only extends for six more days. After that, our friend here goes either to the full SETI Commission, as an ET, or to the Q Team—the Quantum Singularity Team—as an AO. Time is of the essence; I'm on a fairly short string, you see. So while I was waiting at High Orbital for my lunie staff to prepare Houbolt, I initiated the second contact myself. I stuck my hand—my right hand—into the bowl."

I looked at her with a new and growing respect.

"It flowed out of the bowl and up my arm, a little above my elbow. Like a long glove, the kind my great grandmother used to wear to church."

"And?"

"I wrote this down." She showed me a pad on which was written:



"It's Icelandic and it means 'New Growth.' I had brought the pad and pencil with me, along with a tape recorder. It was over before I knew it; it didn't even feel strange. I just picked up the pencil and wrote."

"This is your handwriting?"

"Not at all. I'm right-handed, and I wrote this with my left. My right hand was in the bowl."

"Then what?"

"Then it flowed—sort of rippled; it's quite strange, but you'll see—back down my arm and into the bowl. All this is at High Orbital in zero g, remember, and there's nothing to keep our little ET in the bowl except that it wants to be there. Or something."

"You're calling it an ET now."

"Wouldn't you call this communication, or at least an attempt to communicate? Unofficially speaking, this and its method of arrival are enough to convince me. What else would you call it but an ET?"

"A ouija smudge?" I thought—but I said nothing. The whole business was beginning to sound crazy to me. The dark non-substance in the bowl had looked about as intelligent as the coffee left in my cup; and I wasn't too sure anymore about the woman in the wheelchair.

"I can see you're not convinced," said Hvarlgen. "No matter; you will

be. At any rate, I spent the next few hours under guard, like Odysseus lashed to the mast, to make sure I didn't follow Mersault out an airlock. Then I tried it again."

"Stuck your hand in the bowl."

"My right hand, again. This time I was holding the pencil in my left, ready to go. But this time our friend, our ET, our whatever, was very reluctant. Only after a couple of tries did it *ripple* onto my arm; and then only an inch or so up my wrist, and only for a moment. But it worked. It's like it was communicating directly with my musculature rather than my consciousness. Without even thinking about it, I wrote this—"

She turned the page on the pad and I saw:

A handwritten note in cursive script that reads "gamall man". The word "gamall" is written in a slightly larger, more prominent hand than "man".

"Which says, 'Old Man'."

I nodded. "So naturally, you sent Here's Johnny for me."

Hvarlgen laughed and scowled, and I understood for the first time that her scowl was a smile; she just wore it upside down.

"You're getting ahead of yourself, Major. I interpreted all this to mean that there was a reluctance to communicate with me, which had something to do with my age or my sex or both. Since we hadn't left for the Moon yet, I used my somewhat extravagant authority and sent the shuttle back down. I recruited an old friend, a former professor of mine—a retired adviser to SETI, in fact—who had spent time at Houbolt, and brought him to Luna with me. That clipped another three days out of my precious time."

"So where is he? Out the airlock, I suppose, or I wouldn't be here."

"Not quite out the airlock yet," said Hvarlgen. "Come with me and you'll see."

I had never met Dr. Soo Lee Kim, but I had heard of him. A tiny man with long, flying white hair like Einstein, he was an astronomer, the leader of the deep-space optical team that had been kicked out of Houbolt when it had been turned into a semi-automated warning station. Dr. Kim had won a Nobel Prize. He had a galaxy named after him. Now he occupied one of the two beds in the infirmary under the clear dome in East. The other one was empty.

I smelled death in the room and realized it was PeaceAble, the sinsemilla nasal spray given to terminal patients. It's a complicated aroma for me, the smell of love and loss together, a curious mixture I knew well from the last weeks of my first wife, the one I went back to when she was dying. But that's another story altogether.

Dr. Kim looked cheerful enough. He had been expecting us.

"I'm so glad you're here; now perhaps we can begin to communicate," he said in Cambridge-accented English. "As you probably know, the Shadow won't talk with me."

"The Shadow?"

"That's what I call it. From your old American radio serial. 'Who knows what Evil lurks in the Hearts of Men? The Shadow Knows!'"

"You don't look that old to me," I said.

"I'm not; I'll be seventy-two next week, when the *Diana* returns, if I'm unfortunate enough to last that long." He took a quick shot of PeaceAble from an imitation ebony spraypipe, and continued: "Collecting old radio tapes was a hobby I picked up when I was at university. They were forty-five years old even then, forty-five years ago. I don't suppose you remember Sky King and his Radio Ranch?"

"Nobody's that old, Dr. Kim. I'm only seventy-six. How old do you have to be for this ghost-in-a-bowl?"

"The Shadow," he corrected. "Oh, you're quite old enough. I'm old enough, actually, I think. Or would have been, if it weren't for . . ."

"Start at the beginning, Dr. Kim," said Hvarlgen. "Please. The Major needs to know everything that has happened."

"The beginning? Then let's start at the end, as the Shadow starts." He laughed enigmatically. "I have learned one thing, at least: language is contained as much in the musculature as in the brain. The first time, I did as Sunda did; I stuck my hand into the bowl, and my brain was looking on, unattached, as the Shadow picked up my hand, and with it picked up a pencil . . ."

"And wrote you a letter," I said.

"Drew me a picture," Dr. Kim corrected. "Korean is at least partly an ideographic language." He reached under the bed and pulled out a paper, on which was written:

나지름 벗어 주세요.

"Take me to your leader?" I guessed.

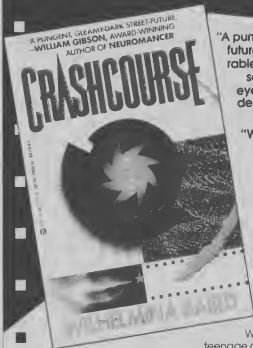
"It suggests a more intimate relationship, which I immediately implemented, so to speak, and which—"

"More intimate?"

"—resulted in this."

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"Like Sunda's message, it means 'new growth,'" he said. "It also has another meaning in the vernacular; it means cancer."

"Oh."

I must have winced, because he said, "Oh, it's all right. I knew it already; colon cancer; I had known it for four months. I just hadn't told Sunda because I didn't think it mattered."

"Then it wasn't the Shadow that—?" I asked.

"Gave it to me? No," said Dr. Kim. "The Shadow was in a position, so to speak, to detect it, that's all." He either grinned or grimaced in pain (it was hard to tell) and took another shot of PeaceAble. "Don't forget, 'the Shadow Knows.'"

The young are sentimental around death but the old have no such problem. "Tough," I said.

"There are no happy endings," Dr. Kim said. "At least, thanks to The Shadow, I got my trip back to the Moon. With any luck I might even end my days here. Wouldn't it make a great tombstone, the Moon? Hanging there in the sky, bigger than a thousand pyramids. And lighted, to boot. Would put to rest forever the slander that all Koreans have good taste." He paused for another shot. "But the problem is, that because of the cancer—apparently—the Shadow won't relate to me. I think it mistakes the cancer for youth. That second contact was my last. So tomorrow it's your turn, right?" He looked from me to Hvarlgen.

Hvarlgen and I looked at each other.

"So I'm next," I said. "Old man number two."

"This is the point at which I give you the chance to back out," Hvarlgen said. "Much as I hate to. But if you turn me down, I'll still have time for one more shot; your alternate is doing his meds right now in Reykjavik."

I could tell she was lying; if she had only six days left, I was her only hope. "Why me in the first place?" I asked.

"You were the oldest reasonably healthy male I could find on such short notice who was space qualified. I knew you'd been to Houbolt. Plus I liked your looks, Major. Intuition. You looked like the kind of guy who might stick his neck out."

"Neck?" laughed Dr. Kim, and she shot him a dirty look.

"Of course, I could be wrong," she said to me.

She was gut-checking me but I didn't mind; I hadn't been gut-checked in years. I looked at Hvarlgen. I looked at Dr. Kim. I looked at the million stars beyond them and figured what the hell.

"Okay," I said. "I guess I can stick my hand in a fishbowl for science."

Dr. Kim laughed again and Hvarlgen shot him an angry look. "There's one thing you should know—" she began.

Dr. Kim finished for her: "The Shadow doesn't want to shake hands

with you, Major Bewley. It wants to crawl up your ass and look around. Like it crawled up mine."

TWO

I showed up at Grand Central the next morning wearing the bright orange tunic with the SETI patch, just to prove to Hvarlgen I was on her team. We had coffee. "Scared?"

"Wouldn't you be scared?" I said. "For one thing, this Shadow is a cancer detector. Then, the business with Mersault. . . ."

"It's unlikely that our people in Reykjavik missed anything. And indications are that Mersault may have been independently suicidal. Zippe-Buisson hires some weirdos. But you're right, Major, one never knows."

I followed her down the forty-meter tube to East. We were initiating the first contact session in the infirmary, so that Dr. Kim could participate, or at least observe. Hvarlgen was literally rearing to go: the chair was tilted back so far that she rode it almost prone.

Three of the five periphery domes have magnolias—those reptilian trees love the Moon—but it is East's that is the most lush, its leaves picking up the lunar palette from the regolith of the crater floor and processing it into a new, complex gray unseen before.

Dr. Kim's bed was under the tree. He was awake, waiting for us. He caressed the spraypipe in his fingers like a good luck charm. "Good morning, colleagues," he said.

Hvarlgen rolled to his bedside and kissed his withered cheek.

Two lunies rolled in a wheeled table; on it was the Shadow in its bowl. Another lunie carried the film camera on her shoulder. Another carried a bright yellow plastic chair. It was for me.

The big moment had arrived. Hvarlgen and I approached the table together. When she picked up the bowl, I noticed that the Shadow pulled away from her hands toward the center. It moved in a rippling motion that both repelled and attracted my eyes.

She put the bowl on the floor in front of the chair. "Let's begin," she said, clicking on the video recorder she carried on her lap. The film camera whirred as I slipped my pants off, over my shoes, and stood there naked under my tunic. It was 9:46 HT (Houston/Houbolt time) on the wall.

I felt frightened. I felt embarrassed. Worse, I felt ridiculous, especially with the young lunies—girls and boys—sitting on the empty bed, watching.

"Oh, Major, please quit worrying!" Hvarlgen said. "Women are used

to being prodded and poked between their legs. Men can put up with it once in a while. Sit down."

I sat down; the yellow plastic was cold on my butt. Hvarlgen nudged my knees apart wordlessly and pushed the bowl between my feet, then rolled backward to the head of Dr. Kim's bed, under the magnolia. I clutched pencil in one hand and paper in the other. Hvarlgen and Dr. Kim had explained what would happen, but it was still a shock. The Shadow moved—*twisted*—out of the bowl, flowed up between my legs and disappeared up my ass.

I watched it, fascinated. I felt no fear or dread. There was no "feeling" as such; it really *was* like a shadow. I kept myself covered by the tunic, out of modesty; but I knew as soon as the Shadow was inside me, because—

There was someone else in the room. He was standing across the room, not far from the foot of Dr. Kim's bed. He was not quite solid, and not quite full sized, and he was flickering like a bad light bulb; but I knew immediately "who" it was.

It was me.

I moved my arm slightly, to see if he would move his, like a mirror image, but he didn't. He flickered and with each flicker got either bigger, or closer, or both. There was no frame of reference; no way to judge his size. It was somehow very clear that he or it was not *in* the room with us; not occupying the same space. It raised the hair on the back of my head, and judging from the palpable silence in the room, everyone else's as well.

We were seeing a ghost.

It was Hvarlgen who finally spoke. "Who are you?"

There was no answer.

I tried moving my arm again but the Shadow (for already that was how I thought of the image) answered none of my movements. Somehow that made it better; it was as if I were watching a film of myself and not a reflection. But it was an old film; I looked younger. And when I looked to one side a little, the image disappeared.

"Who are you?" said Hvarlgen again; it was more a statement than a question. "He," "it,"—the Shadow—started flickering, faster and faster, and I suddenly felt sick at my stomach.

I bent over, almost retching; I covered my mouth and then tried to aim toward the bowl at the foot of the chair. But it didn't matter—nothing came out, even though I saw the Shadow was pooled back in its bowl.

I shook my hands and examined them; they were clean.

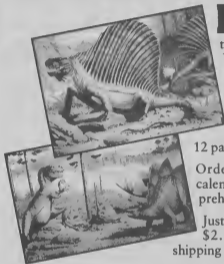
The ghost was gone.

The session was over. Hvarlgen was staring at me. I looked at my watch; it was 9:54. The whole thing had lasted six minutes.

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The pad and pencil lay on the floor where I had dropped them. The pad was blank.

"Well, now, that was interesting," said Dr. Kim, taking a long shot of PeaceAble.

Hvarlgen sent the lunies out, and had coffee sent in, and we discussed the session over a light lunch. Very light; I was on the high-protein, low-fiber "astronaut's diet" of moonjirky. Plus, I was still feeling a little queasy.

We all agreed that the image was me, or an approximation of me. "But younger," said Dr. Kim.

"So what is it trying to say?" asked Hvarlgen. Neither Dr. Kim nor I answered; it seemed useless to speculate. She clicked on her video recorder. Instead of a holovid image, what came up was a ball of bright static. She fast forwarded but nothing changed.

"Damn! Just as I had suspected," she said. "If we are to get any image at all, it will be on film. But film has to be processed chemically, which means it has to go all the way back to Earth before we'll even know if it works. In the meantime—"

"In the meantime," Dr. Kim said, "Why don't we try it again?"

Hvarlgen got on her chair-phone and soon the lunies arrived with the Shadow in its bowl, the film camera, and the rest of the crew, who had presumably heard about the morning session. It was 1:35 (HT). Surprisingly, it was just as humiliating for me the second time. But science is science; I took off my pants. The film camera wheezed and whirred on a lunie's shoulder. I held the pad and pencil in one hand, ready. Hvarlgen rolled back to Dr. Kim's bed. I sat on the cold plastic chair and spread my legs. I forgot my embarrassment as the Shadow *twisted* out of its bowl and up—and disappeared—

And there he was again. The Shadow. Again, the figure started small and flickered itself bigger and bigger, until it was about half the size of someone standing in the room with us; though we all knew somehow that it wasn't. That it was far away.

This time he was talking, though there was no sound. He stopped talking, then started again. He was wearing blue coveralls like I used to wear in the Service, not the orange tunic. I couldn't see his feet no matter how hard I looked for them; it was as if my eyes glanced off. I wear a Service ring but I couldn't see it; the Shadow's hands were blurred. I wanted to ask him who he was, but I felt it was not my place. We had agreed earlier that no one but Hvarlgen was to speak.

"Who are you?" she asked.

The voice, when it came, surprised us all: "Not a who."

Everyone in the room turned to look at me, even though it was not my voice. I would have turned, myself, had I not been the point toward which everyone was looking.

"Then what are you?"

"A communications protocol." The sound of the voice was completely out of synch with the image's mouth. Also, the sound did not seem to come from anywhere; I heard it directly with my mind, not my ears.

"From where?" asked Hvarlgen.

"A two device."

The lunies sitting in a row on the bed were absolutely still. No one in the room was breathing; including me.

"What is a two device?" asked Hvarlgen.

This time the lips were almost in synch with the words: "One and—" The Shadow inclined toward us in a curious, almost courtly gesture—"the Other."

The sound seemed to originate inside my head, like a memory of a voice. Like a memory, it seemed perfectly clear but characterless. I wondered if it were my voice, as the image was "my" image, but I couldn't tell.

"What Other?" Hvarlgen asked.

"Only one Other."

"What do you want?"

As if in answer, the image began to flicker again, and I was suddenly sick to my stomach. The next thing I knew I was looking down into the bowl, at the original dark non-substance we had called the Shadow. Though still dark it seemed clearer, and cold, and deep. I was suddenly conscious of the cold stars blazing through the dome overhead; the fierce vacuum all around; the cold plastic chair on my butt.

"Major?"

Hvarlgen's hand was on my wrist. I looked up—to applause from the bed where the lunies were sitting, like bright yellow birds, all in a row.

"Nobody leaves!" said Hvarlgen. She went around the room. All agreed on what the Shadow had said. All agreed that it had been inside their heads, more like a memory of a voice, or an imaginary voice, than a sound. All agreed that it had not been my voice.

"Now everybody leave," she said. "Dr. Kim and I need to have a talk."

"Including me?" I asked.

"You can stay. And he can stay." She pointed toward the bowl, which the lunies were placing back on its table. They left it by the door.

"Damn!" said Hvarlgen. Irrationally, she shook the recorder but there was no record of the Shadow's words, anymore than of its image. "The

problem is, we have no hard evidence of any communication at all. And yet we all know it happened."

Dr. Kim took a snort of PeaceAble and smiled somewhat inscrutably. "Unless we think the Major here was hypnotizing us."

"Which we don't," said Hvarlgen. It was late afternoon. We were having still more coffee under the magnolia. "But what I don't understand," she said, "is how can it make us hear without making a print, a track in the air."

"Clearly it works directly on the hearing centers in the brain," Dr. Kim said.

"Without a physical event?" said Hvarlgen. "Without a material connection? That's telepathy!"

"It's all physical," said Dr. Kim. "Or none of it. Is that thing material? Maybe it accesses our brains visually. We were all looking at it when we heard it talk. The brain is stuff just as much as air is stuff. Light is stuff. Consciousness is stuff."

"So why the physical contact at all?" I asked. "The Shadow's not really here; I can't feel it, we can't touch it or even photograph it. Why does it have to enter my body at all? If it does, why can't it just sort of slip in through the skin, or the eyes, instead of . . . the way it does."

"Maybe it's scanning you," Hvarlgen said. "For the image."

"And maybe it can only scan certain types," said Dr. Kim. "Or maybe it's restricted. Just as we might be forbidden to trade with stone age tribesmen, they—whoever or whatever they are—might have a prohibition against certain stages or kinds of life."

"You mean the 'New Growth' business?" I asked.

"Right. Maybe old folks seem less vulnerable to them. Maybe the contact is destructive to growing tissue. Or even fatal. Look at what happened to Mersault. But I'm just guessing! And my guess is that you have not quite finished menopause, Sunda, right?"

She smiled. Just as her scowls were smiles, her smiles were grimaces. "Not quite."

"See? And in my case, perhaps the flourishing cancer with its exorbitant greed for life was mistaken for youth. Anyway . . . we are dealing with prohibitions. Formalities. Perhaps even the innovative mode of contact is a formality, like a handshake. What could be more logical?" Dr. Kim took another snort of PeaceAble, filling the infirmary with a sweet heavy smell.

"It's hard to think of it as a handshake," I said.

"Why? The anus, the asshole in vulgar parlance, is sort of a joke, but in our secret heart of hearts, for all of us, it's sort of the seat—so to speak—of the physical being. It may be perceived by this Other as the seat of consciousness as well. We're much more conscious of it than, say,

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the heart. Certainly more conscious of it physically than the brain. It alerts us to danger by tightening up. It even speaks from time to time. . . .”

“Okay, okay,” said Hvarlgen. “We get the point. Let’s get back to work. Shall we go again?”

“Without the lunies?” Dr. Kim asked.

“Why not?”

“Because without a video or sound image, they are our only corroboration that there is any communication going on here. I know it’s your project, Sunda, but if I were you I would move more deliberately.”

“You’re right. It’s almost five o’clock. Let’s wait and go after supper.”

I had supper alone. Hvarlgen was on the phone, arguing with somebody named Sidrath. A poster on the wall over her head said $D = 96$. Hvarlgen sounded pleading, then sarcastic, then pleading again; I felt like an eavesdropper, so I left without coffee and walked to East alone.

Dr. Kim was asleep. The Shadow lay in its bowl. It was fascinating to look at it. It lay still but seemed, somehow, to be moving at great speed. It was dark but I could sense light behind it, like the stars through thin clouds. I was tempted to touch it; I reached out one finger . . .

“That you, Major?” Dr. Kim sat up. “Where’s Sunda?”

“She’s on the phone with somebody named Sidrath. She’s been arguing with him for almost an hour.”

“He’s the head of the Q team. He’s probably setting up in High Orbital, for when the Shadow arrives. They are assembling all sorts of fancy equipment. They think we’re dealing with some sort of anti-matter here, which is why they can’t take it down to the surface.”

“What do you think it is?” I asked. I pulled the plastic chair over and sat with him, looking up at the stars through the clear dome and the dark magnolia leaves.

“I think it’s unusual, surprising,” Dr. Kim said. “That’s all I require of life these days. I no longer try to understand or comprehend things. Dying is funny. You realize for the first time you are not going to finish Dante. You give up on it.” He took a shot of PeaceAble. “Did you ever wonder why the Shadow looks younger than you?”

“You have a theory?”

“Robert Louis Stevenson had a theory,” he said. “He once said that our chronological age is but a scout, sent out in advance of the ‘army’ of who we feel we are—which always lags several years behind. In your mind, Major, you are still a young man; at most, in your fifties. That’s the image the Shadow gets from you, and therefore the image he gives us.”

I heard his pipe hiss again.

“I’d offer you a shot, but—”

"It's okay," I said. "I know, I'm a test bunny."

"You guys ready?" It was Hvarlgen, rolling through the doorway. It was time to go again.

The plastic chair had been left in place. Two lunies wheeled the bowl in on its table. The rest of the lunies drifted in, sitting on the bed and clustering by the doorway. At 7:34 P.M. Hvarlgen cleared her throat and looked at me impatiently. I pulled off my pants; I sat down in the chair and spread my withered old shanks—

This time, without ascending between my legs, the Shadow *twisted* in its bowl and disappeared; the movement was somehow sickening, and I gagged—

And there it was; he was. Was it my imagination, or was my image, the Shadow, clearer and more positive than it had been? It seemed to have a kind of glow. He smiled.

Hvarlgen wasn't waiting around this time. "Where are you from?" she asked.

"Not from a where. The protocol is a where."

"What do you want?"

"Adjusting the protocol," said the voice. It was so clear now that I thought it must be a sound. But I watched the aural indicator lights on Hvarlgen's video recorder, and there was nothing. As before, the voice was only inside our heads.

"Where are the Others?" asked Hvarlgen again.

"Only the protocol is where," said the Shadow. "A wherewhen point." It seemed to enjoy answering her questions. It had stopped flickering and its speech was now in synch with its lip movements. Its movements looked familiar; gentle; graceful. I felt a certain proprietary affection for it, knowing it was an idealized version of myself.

"What do you want?" Hvarlgen asked.

"To communicate."

"Through you?"

"The communication will end the protocol. The connection is one-time only." The Shadow looked directly toward us, but not at us. It seemed always to be looking at something we could not see. It was silent, as if waiting for the next question.

When nobody said anything, the image began to fade, ghostlike once again—

And the Shadow *twisted* into being in the bowl at my feet. It seemed even clearer than before. I could see stars behind it. It was like seeing the stars reflected in a pool, only I had the distinct (and uneasy) feeling I was looking up. I even checked the back of my neck with my hand.

That was it for the first day. We'd had three sessions, and Hvarlgen

thought that was enough. Dr. Kim asked us to join him for 4-D Monopoly. He had a passion for the game with its steep mortgage ramps and time-release dice. While we played, the lunies watched movies in Grand Central. We could hear gunshots and bluegrass music in the distance, all the way down the tube.

We began the next morning with a leisurely breakfast. I was still on moonjirky, but I had no appetite anyway. The poster over the coffee machine said $D=77$.

"How many hours until sunrise?" I asked.

"I'm not sure; somewhat less than seventy-seven," Hvarlgen answered. But it wasn't a problem. Even though Houbolt was no longer environmentalized for the lunar day, it would be comfortable for all but the six days of the lunar "noon"—and would probably have been manageable even then, in an emergency. According to Hvarlgen's plan, Here's Johnny was to arrive and take us off soon after sunrise.

Hvarlgen went down the tube toward the infirmary first, followed by me, followed by the lunies. East smelled like PeaceAble, indicating that Dr. Kim had been up for a while. He suggested that he be allowed to ask one question, and Hvarlgen agreed.

Me, I was just the hired asshole. I took off my pants and the bowl was slid between my feet. Ignoring me (or seeming to) the Shadow in the bowl *twisted* itself into nothingness. This time I didn't feel sick. In fact, it was beautiful, slick and fast, like a whale diving.

"Is there a message for us?"

It was Hvarlgen's question. I looked up from the empty bowl and saw the Shadow standing across the room—or across the universe.

"A communication."

"Are you conscious?"

"The protocol is conscious and I am the protocol."

"Who is communicating with us?"

"The Other. Not a who."

"Is it conscious?"

The Shadow said, "You are conscious. The protocol is conscious. The Other is not a wherwhen string."

There was a long silence. "Dr. Kim—" Hvarlgen said. "You had a question?"

"Are you a Feynman device?" Dr. Kim asked.

"The protocol is a two device."

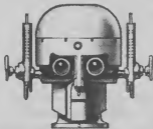
"What is the distance?" Dr. Kim asked.

"Not a distance. A wherwhen loop."

"Where does the energy come from?"

As if in answer, the Shadow began to flicker and fade, and I leaned

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over the bowl (even though I no longer believed that the Shadow was inside of me). And like a dark whale surfacing, the Shadow *twisted* into its bowl. I wondered how such a tiny space could contain a space so huge.

While the lunies cleared the room, and Hvarlgen hurried down to Grand Central to make a phone call, I pulled my chair over to the bed and sat with Dr. Kim.

"I see it's no longer accessing our universe through your butt," he said. "Maybe it has what it needs."

"Hope so," I said. "Meanwhile—what's a Feynman device?"

"Have you ever heard of the EPR paradox?"

"Something to do with Richard Feynman?"

"Indirectly," Dr. Kim said. "The EPR paradox had been proposed by Einstein and two colleagues in an unsuccessful effort to disprove quantum physics. Two linked particles are separated. The 'spin' or orientation of each is indeterminate (in true quantum fashion) until one is determined, up or down. Then the other is the opposite. Instantaneously."

"Even if it's a million light years away," Hvarlgen said, from the doorway. She rolled into the room, shutting the door behind her. "I told Sidrath about your question. He liked it."

"It was never answered." Dr. Kim shrugged.

"In other words, we're talking about faster than light communication," I said.

"Right," said Dr. Kim. "Theoretically, a paradox. It was Feynman who proved that the paradox wasn't a paradox at all. That it was true. And that FTL communication was, at least in theory, possible."

"So that's what our little *isn't* is," I said. "A muon bridge."

"An ansible," said Hvarlgen. "A device for faster than light communication. As I said, Sidrath agrees. What we have here seems to be some version of a Feynman device. Everything that happens to it here happens simultaneously, perhaps as a mirror image, at the other 'end'."

"Across the galaxy," I said.

"Oh, much farther away than that, I think," said Dr. Kim, taking another shot of PeaceAble. "We may be dealing with realms of space and time that don't even intersect our own. I think, for sure, that we are dealing with forms of life that aren't biological."

At noon I asked for a sandwich. "I'm going to quit worrying about my lower intestine," I said. "The Shadow has quit worrying about it."

"We're not sure," said Hvarlgen. "Stay on moonjirky just one more meal. This afternoon, we'll try the session with your pants on and see what happens."

The Shadow didn't seem to notice. (I was a little hurt.) It *twisted* in its

bowl, diving into—another form (my own) which appeared across the room as before.

“When is this communication going to occur?” asked Hvarlgen.

“Soon.” The way the Shadow said the word, it sounded almost like a place—like Moon.

“What is soon?”

“When the protocol is adjusted.”

There was a long silence.

“What kind of communication will it be?” asked Dr. Kim. “Will we hear it?”

“No.”

“See it?”

“No.”

“Why is it that you never speak unless we ask a question?” asked Hvarlgen.

“Because you are half of the protocol,” said the Shadow.

“I thought so,” said Hvarlgen. “We’ve been talking to ourselves!”

The Shadow started to flicker. I resisted the urge to bend over the bowl, and watched him fade away.

I was tired. I went back to my wedgie to sleep, and I dreamed, for the first time in years, of flying. When I got up, Hvarlgen was still in East with Dr. Kim. They were on a conference call with High Orbital and Queens; they were somewhere between calling the Shadow an ET and an AD (alien device).

I left it to them. I ate alone (another sandwich) and then watched the first half of *Bonnie and Clyde* with the lunies. They had a kind of cult thing about Michael J. Pollard. Now I understood why every time something went wrong around the station, one of them was bound to say, “dirt.”

Hvarlgen rolled into Grand Central at almost nine P.M. “We’re going to skip the evening session tonight,” she said. “Sidrath and the Q Team don’t want to miss this promised communication. They are afraid we’ll speed things up, or wear the Shadow out, like an eraser.”

“But you are in charge.” I was surprised to find myself disappointed.

“True. But that’s only a formality. In fact, Sidrath is already on his way to the Moon with Here’s Johnny, in case this communication occurs before they can get the Shadow back to High Orbital. We made a deal; I agreed to limit the sessions to one a day.”

“One a day!”

“I think we’ve learned all we’re going to learn here. All it does is answer the same questions, in a sort of a loop. We’ll go in the morning, Major, as usual. Meanwhile, want to play Monopoly?”

That night I dreamed again that I was flying. The flying itself was flying, so fast that I had to chase it in order not to disappear. The next morning, after breakfast (sausage and eggs) I followed the lunies down the tube to East, where Hvarlgen and Dr. Kim were waiting.

Hvarlgen insisted that I sit in my usual spot. Like a priestess at a ritual, she placed the bowl at my feet, then rolled back to Dr. Kim's bedside. The Shadow *twisted* in the bowl and disappeared; the Shadow appeared again in his blue coveralls, bluer than I remembered.

"Who are the Others?" asked Hvarlgen.

"They are not a they. They are an Other."

(Maybe Hvarlgen was right to limit the sessions, I thought. It was beginning to sound like word games.)

"Another what?" Hvarlgen asked. "Another civilization?"

I heard a sound like a growl. It was Dr. Kim, snoring; he had fallen asleep propped on one elbow, with his spraypipe in his hand.

"Not a civilization. They are not—plural like yourself. Not biological."

"Not material?" asked Hvarlgen.

"Not a wherewhen string," the Shadow said.

"Is the communication ready? Can it take place now?"

"Soon. The protocol is completed. When the communication takes place the protocol will be gone."

I wondered what that meant. We were, supposedly, part of the protocol. I was about to raise my hand to ask permission to ask a question—but the Shadow was already flickering, already *twisting* back into being into its bowl.

Being careful not to awaken Dr. Kim, Hvarlgen shooed everyone out of the infirmary and we went to Grand Central for a late breakfast. I didn't tell her I had already eaten. I had soup and crackers.

The poster said D=55. I had less than two days left on the Moon.

"Isn't Dr. Kim using a lot of that stuff?" I asked.

"He's in a lot of pain," Hvarlgen said. "I just hope he lasts until this communication, whatever it is. At the same time—"

"It's for you," said one of the lunies. "It's the *Diana*. They just completed TLI and they're on their way."

I went back to my wedgie for a nap, and dreamed again of flying. I hadn't dreamed so much since Katie died. I didn't have wings, or even a body—I was the flight itself. The movement was my substance in a way that I understood perfectly, except that the understanding evaporated as soon as I sat up.

The wedgie was cold. I had never felt so alone.

I got dressed and went to Grand Central and found two lunies watching

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Bonnie and Clyde, and Hvarlgen curled up with Sidrath on the phone. I had forgotten how lonely the farside could be. It is the only place in the Universe from which you never see the Earth. Outside was nothing but stars and stones and dust.

I went to the infirmary. Dr. Kim was awake. "Where's Sunda?" he asked.

"On the phone with Sidrath and Here's Johnny. They made Trans Lunar Injection right after lunch. You were asleep."

"So be it," said Dr. Kim. "Did you say hello to our friend?"

I saw the Shadow in the corner, under the magnolia, near the foot of the bed. I felt a shiver. It was the first time he had ever appeared without our—summoning him. The bowl on the table was empty.

"Hello, I guess," I said. "Have you talked to him?"

"He's not talking."

"Shouldn't I get Hvarlgen?"

"It doesn't matter," said Dr. Kim. "It doesn't mean anything. I think he just likes to exist, you know?"

"I'm here anyway," Hvarlgen said, from the door. "What's going on?"

"I think he just likes to exist," said Dr. Kim, again. "Did you ever get the feeling when you were running a program, that it enjoyed running? Existing? It's all in the connection, the dance of the particles. I think our friend the Shadow senses that he won't exist very long, and—"

Even as he spoke the Shadow began to fade. At the same time the dark substance *twisted* into being in the bowl. I looked down into it. It was dark yet clear yet infinitely deep, like infinity itself. I could see stars beyond stars in it.

Hvarlgen seemed relieved that the Shadow was gone. "I'll be glad when the *Diana* gets here," she said. "I don't know which way to turn; which way to proceed."

I sat on the foot of the bed. Dr. Kim took another shot of PeaceAble and passed the pipe to me.

"Dr. Kim!"

"Relax. He's no longer the test bunny, Sunda," he said. "His bowel is no longer the pathway between the stars."

"Still. You know that's only for people who are terminal," Hvarlgen said.

"We'll all terminal, Sunda. We just get off at different stops."

That night after supper we played Monopoly. The Shadow appeared again, and again he had nothing to say. "He doesn't speak unless we call him up," said Hvarlgen.

"Maybe the ceremony, the chair, the lunies watching, are part of the protocol," said Dr. Kim. "Like the questions."

"What about the Others? Do you think we'll see them?" I asked.

"My guess is that there's no them to see," said Dr. Kim.

"What do you mean?"

"Imagine a being larger than star systems, that manipulates on the subatomic level, where the Newtonian universe is an illogical dream that cannot be conceptualized. A being that reproduces itself as waves, in order to exist, that is one and yet many. A being that is not a wherewhen string—as the Shadow calls it—but a series of one-time events . . ."

"Dr. Kim," said Hvarlgen. She played a conservative but deadly game.

"Yes, my dear?"

"Pay attention. You just landed on my city. Cash or credit?"

"Credit," he said.

That night I dreamed. I slept late, and woke up exhausted. I found Hvarlgen in Grand Central, on the phone with Sidrath, as usual lately. A lunie was changing the poster from $D=29$ to $D=11$.

"Here's Johnny and Sidrath just crossed Wolf Creek Pass," Hvarlgen said, hanging up.

"They're balling the jack," I said.

"They're using boosters," she said. "We all have the feeling we're running out of time."

This was to be, by agreement, our last contact session. All the lunies were there; in their yellow tunics they were as alike as bees. I sat in the usual spot, which seemed to be part of the protocol. I enjoyed the position of prominence—especially since I got to keep my pants on.

Hvarlgen placed the bowl on the floor and the dark whale dove—*twisted* beautifully out of its bowl—and the Shadow appeared in the image of a man.

Hvarlgen looked at me. "Do you have a question?"

"What happens after the communication?" I asked.

"I cease to be."

"Will we cease to be?"

"You are a wherewhen string."

"What are you?" asked Dr. Kim.

"Not a what. A wherewhen point."

"When does the communication take place?" asked Hvarlgen.

"Soon." He was repeating himself, we were repeating ourselves. Was it my imagination, or did the Shadow seem weary?

Hvarlgen, nothing if not democratic, turned her chair toward the lunies gathered in the doorway and on the bed. "Do any of you have any questions?"

There were none.

There was a long silence and the Shadow began to fade. I felt like I

was seeing him for the last time, and I felt a sense of loss. It was my image that was fading away . . .

"Wait!" I wanted to say. "Speak!" But I said nothing. Soon the Shadow was back in its bowl.

"I have to get some sleep," said Dr. Kim, taking a shot of PeaceAble.

"Come on, Major," said Hvarlgen. We left, taking the lunies with us.

I made my own lunch, then watched a little bit of *Bonnie and Clyde* with the lunies. Like them, I was tired of the Moon. I was tired of the Shadow. Tired of waiting for either the communication, or the arrival of the *Diana*—both events over which we had no control.

I took a walk around the little-used periphery tunnel that led from South to North via West. It was cold and smelly. Ahead of me I saw a new, unfamiliar light. I hurried to West, suspecting what it was. Forty kilometers away, the high ragged rim of 17,000 foot peaks at the western edge of Korolev was touched with sunlight.

Dawn was still hours away, but it had already struck the tops of the nameless mountains, which were as bright in the sky as a new moon, the Moon's moon, casting temporary backward shadows across the crater floor. Everything seemed reversed.

I stood for what seemed like hours, watching. The dawn was as slow as an hour hand, and I grew cold.

From West I cut straight through to East, even though I hadn't been invited. Hvarlgen was still on the phone, and I felt like talking with somebody. Maybe Dr. Kim would be awake.

The infirmary smelled like a Tennessee hayfield, bringing back sudden memories of childhood and summer. The Shadow was standing in the shadows under the magnolia, looking—worn out. Like an old person, I thought, he was fading away.

Dr. Kim was staring straight up at the stars. His spraypipe had fallen from his fingers, onto the floor. He was dead.

Dr. Kim had left four numbers in an envelope marked "Sunda," with instructions that they were to be called as soon as he died, even though they lived in four different time zones, scattered around the Earth. They were his children. Most of them were awakened from sleep, but they weren't surprised; Dr. Kim had already said his goodbyes.

As I watched Hvarlgen making the calls, for the first time in years I felt lonesome for the family I had never had. I wandered from Grand Central back down to East. Dr. Kim's body had been put in the airlock to decompress slowly, and the room was empty except for the Shadow, which stood silently at the foot of the bed, like a mourner. I lay down on Dr. Kim's bed and looked up through the magnolia, trying to imagine

what his eyes had last seen. The dawn light still hadn't touched the dome, and the galaxies hung in the sky like sparks from a burning city.

Hvarlgen came to get me, and we held a brief service in Grand Central. Dr. Kim's body was still in the airlock, but the *Portable Dante* and the spraypipe on the table represented him. The lunies attended in shifts, since they were preparing the station for incoming. Hvarlgen read something in Old Norse, then something in Korean, then a bit from the King James Bible about the Valley of the Shadow of Death.

Then we suited up.

Burial on the moon is illegal according to at least three overlapping legal systems, but Hvarlgen didn't seem to mind. Here's Johnny and Sidrath had made LOI (lunar orbit insertion) and told her to finish before they landed, so they wouldn't be compromised by her bending of the rules.

The dawn was already halfway down the mountains by the time we locked out. Soon the raw sunlight would be racing, or at least loping, across the crater floor. The station would be liveable for several more days, at least until mid-morning; but as we didn't have proper suits for a sunlight EVA, even a dawn EVA, we would have to hurry.

It was my first EVA in years. One of the lunies and I were the pall bearers (only two are needed on the Moon), while Hvarlgen followed in her fat-tired EVA chair. Even though we had decompressed Dr. Kim's body as slowly as possible, he had still swelled in the vacuum. His face was filled out and he looked almost young.

We carried him a hundred meters across the crater floor, to a fairly flat stone (flat stones are rare on the Moon), following the instructions we had found in the envelope. Dr. Kim had picked out his grave site from his bed in East.

We laid him face up on the table-shaped rock, the way they used to lay Indians so the vultures could swoop down to eat their hearts. Only here was a sky too deep for vultures. Hvarlgen read a few more words, and we started back. The crater floor was half lit by the mountains to the west. The sunlight had painted them from peak to foot; so that we cast long shadows—the "wrong" way. In a few weeks, as noon approached, with its 250 degree temperatures, it would cook Dr. Kim into bone and ash and vapor; until then he would lie in state letting the stars which he had studied for over half a century study him.

When we locked back in, the chimes for incoming were ringing. Here's Johnny and Sidrath had timed it all perfectly. Hvarlgen rolled off on two wheels to meet them; I was in no hurry. By the time I got to Grand Central, it was empty—everyone was greeting the *Diana* at South. I

walked back down the tube to East. The bowl was gone; it had been returned to Other for Sidrath's arrival. But The Shadow didn't seem to notice. He was standing at the foot of the bed, no longer faded. For the first time he seemed to be looking directly at me. I didn't know whether to say hello or goodbye. The Shadow seemed to be receding faster and faster, and me with him. I lost my balance and fell to one knee just as I "felt" what came to be known, much later, around the world, as the Brush.

THREE

Four days short of eleven months later, there was a knock at the door of my Road Lord.

"Major Bewley?"

"Colonel," I said.

It was Here's Johnny. He was wearing a faux leather suit that somehow told me he had gone ahead and taken retirement. I wasn't surprised. He was on his way to Los Angeles to live with his sister. "Aren't you going to ask me in?"

"Better than that," I said. "You're spending the night."

It was almost as if we were friends, and at my age almost is as good as the real thing, almost. I cleared a place on the couch (my picture—the same one—was in an eighteen-inch stack of magazines) and he sat down. Here's Johnny had gained twenty pounds, which often happens to lunies when they lock in for good. I put on a fresh pot of coffee. It must have been the smell of the coffee that made us both think of Hvarlgen.

"She's in Reykjavik," Here's Johnny said. "When the film didn't show anything, that was it for her. The last straw. She left the rest of it up to Sidrath and the Commission."

"The rest of what?" There was no more Shadow; both the image and the substance in the bowl had disappeared with the Brush. As promised. "What did they have left to do?"

"All the surveys, interviews, population samples. All the stuff you've read about the Brush; it all came from Sidrath and the Commission. But without Hvarlgen's help. Or yours, I happened to notice."

"I'd had enough, myself," I said. "I felt like we were all getting a little crazy. That whole week was like a dream. Plus, there seemed, at the time, to be nothing to say. What I had experienced was, literally, as you know—as we all know now—indescribable. Since my contract was up, I sort of cut and ran because I didn't want to be roped into some elaborate effort to figure it all out."

"And you thought you were the only one."

"Well, didn't we all? At first, anyway."

It had taken several months of research to determine, positively, that every man, woman, and child on and off the planet (plus, it was now thought, a high percentage of dogs) had experienced the Brush at the same instant. We were no more able to describe it than the dogs were. It was intensely sensual but in no way physical, brilliantly colorful but not visible, musical but not quite a sound—an entirely new sensation, indescribable and unforgettable at the same time. The best description I heard was from an Indian film-maker, who said it was as if someone had painted his soul with light. That's poetic license, of course. It had happened in less than an instant, but it was days before anyone spoke of it, and weeks before the SETI commission realized it was the communication we had been promised.

By then it was only a memory. And lucky it was that we all had felt it: otherwise some of us would be spending the next few centuries trying to describe it to those who hadn't. A new religion maybe. As it was, most people on the planet were going about their business as if it had never happened, while a few were still trying to figure out what the Brush meant to the children. And the dogs.

"It was a bitter disappointment to Hvarlgen," said Here's Johnny. It was late; we were sitting outside, having a whiskey, waiting to catch the sunset.

"I know," I said. "To her, it was an insult. She called it the Brush-off. I can understand her point of view. We are finally contacted by another, maybe the only other life form in the universe, but it has nothing to say. No more than a hello, how are you. A wave from a passing ship, she called it."

"Maybe because it happened to everybody," Here's Johnny said.

"I can understand that too," I said. "We all thought it was going to be just for us."

One of my unofficial grandsons rode up on a bicycle carrying a turtle. I gave him a dollar for it, and put it into a polyboard box under the trailer with two other turtles. "I pay the kids for the ones they pick up off the road," I said. "Then after sundown I let them go, away from the highway."

"Me, I'm more optimistic," Here's Johnny said. "Maybe the children who experienced the Brush will grow up different. Maybe smarter or less violent."

"Or maybe the dogs," I said.

"What do you think?" he asked. "You were, after all, the first contact."

"I was just the pattern for the protocol," I said. "I got the same communication as everyone else, no more or no less. I'm convinced of that. I was just used to, you know, set up the tuning."

"You weren't disappointed?"

"I was disappointed that Dr. Kim didn't get to experience it. But who knows, maybe he did. As for me, I'm an old man. I don't expect things to mean anything. I just sort of enjoy them. Look there."

Off to the west, a range of barren peaks was hurling itself between Slab City and the nearest star, painting our trailers with new darkness. The clash of photons set up a barrage of colors in the sky overhead. We watched the sun set in silence; then I got one end of the box and Here's Johnny got the other, and we dragged it out to a pile of boulders at the edge of the desert and deposited the turtles onto the still-warm sand.

"You do this every night?"

"Why not?" I said. "Maybe it's turtles all the way down."

But Here's Johnny didn't get the joke. Which goes to show, as Chuck Berry once said, you never can tell. ●

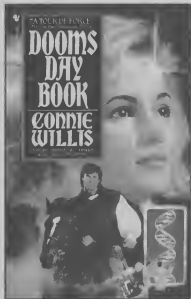
NEXT ISSUE

The popular **R. Garcia y Robertson** returns to these pages next month with a vivid and action-packed new novella, our October cover story, "Down the River." This is a sequel to last year's "The Virgin and the Dinosaur," showing us how Jake and Peg, that bumbling team of ill-matched time-travelers, while on their way back to the future from a disaster-haunted trip to the Upper Cretaceous, are forced to make an unexpected stopover in the American South, in the days just before the Civil War. Now, after dodging hungry dinosaurs in the Cretaceous, you'd think that it'd be no real challenge to handle life on the Mississippi, but you'd be *wrong*—dead wrong. Because as Jake and Peg steam down the Big River on a luxurious paddlewheeler, fighting their way through motley hordes of thugs, footpads, slavers, thieves, riverboat gamblers, sharpies, vigilantes, con-men, cutpurses, murderers, and lowlifes of every description, with only their wits and a few pieces of far-future high-tech to help them out, they soon discover that *humans* are the most dangerous predators of all. . . . If you're looking for a shot of pure wild flat-out pull-out-all-the-stops entertainment, this is for you. The evocative cover is by Todd Lockwood.

ALSO IN OCTOBER: hot new British writer **Ian R. MacLeod** returns with a story that we would not be at all surprised to see on next

(Continued on page 65)

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CLOSE ENCOUNTER

Connie Willis

Last year, regular *Asimov's* contributor Connie Willis stepped off a curb wrong at the Nebula Awards Conference in Atlanta and was seriously injured—breaking her foot and herniating a disk. Shortly after she was released from the hospital we received the following manuscript. Ms. Willis, author of "Spice Pogrom" (October 1986) and other stories about aliens, lives in Greeley, Colorado, with her cat Lorena (named for the heroine in *Lonesome Dove*) and her bulldog Bertie Wooster (named for the P. G. Wodehouse character).

She tells us she hasn't had much time for writing since the accident, as she's been busy washing her hair.

art: Laurie Harden





AUTHOR'S NOTE: I found what follows in the throw-up pan they send home with you from the hospital along with a bottle of Keri lotion and a box of Kleenex that cost forty-eight dollars. It's in my handwriting, but I have no memory of writing it. That may be because of the drugs I was given for pain. On my hospital bill (page 19), it says I was given injections of streibadol every four hours, and when I looked streibadol up in Merck's drug compendium, it said short-term memory loss was a common side effect. It didn't say hallucinations were, though, and I thought you'd better see this, just in case.

I think I may have discovered something, lying here in the hospital, and I decided I'd better get it down while the nurse is out of the room. I know it's going to sound crazy, and I don't have any proof, but it all makes sense, and I want it written down in case something happens to me.

I'm going to start at the beginning, so you can see how I arrived at the conclusion I did. I've got plenty of time. My nurse said she was bringing my discharge papers in right away, so that gives me at least a couple of hours.

Okay, I had surgery for a herniated disk two days ago, and when I came out of the anesthetic, my TV was on. It's one of those pocket-hanky-sized ones on a big boom sort of thing suspended from the ceiling, presumably so you can reach overhead and swing it down in front of you.

If you could, you wouldn't be in the hospital, but somebody must have, because it was on, and Oprah was asking a nine-year old kid why he'd encased his springer spaniel's tail in cement.

"My parents named me Gerald," the kid was saying, "so I'm suffering from Nominative Dysfunction Disorder."

I tried to reach the on-off switch on the side of the TV, remembered abruptly that I had had major surgery, and lay very, very still while the expert of the day explained that children with names like Myrtle and Habakkuk experience lifelong discrimination, which results in NDD and, apparently, tailpaving.

"I was acting out my pain," the kid said. He had little squinchy eyes, which reminded me of my cousin Vendetta who used to come stay with us every summer and who was definitely dysfunctional, even though we hadn't had words like dysfunction back then. We'd had words like sneak and monster and brat.

"NDD victims have problems directing their anger appropriately," the expert said. "They develop abnormal play patterns, perform poorly on tests, and are unable to form normal peer relationships."

It had never occurred to me that my cousin Vendetta acted the way she did because she had NDD. I had always assumed it was the other

way around, that my aunt had taken one look at her little squinchy eyes, known exactly how she was going to turn out, and had named her accordingly.

"How did it make you feel, being named Gerald?" Oprah (whose name I wouldn't exactly call functional either) asked the kid.

"It lowered my self-esteem," the kid said.

I looked around for the nurse's call button, but it was farther away than the on-off switch so, moving very, very slowly, I moved my arm toward the switch.

I didn't make it that far. About halfway I began yelping like the kid's springer spaniel probably had when he'd had his tail turned into a side-walk, hit at the closest button, and fell back, exhausted. The button must have been the channel changer because now Geraldo was on, talking to a woman with bad hair.

"So the flying saucer landed on your lawn," Geraldo was saying to her. "What happened then?"

"These aliens with silver outfits and funny eyes told me I had to go with them, that they had come to save mankind, and then they took me on board their ship," the woman said. Her hair looked like it needed to be saved—it was a brightish orange and was tied into a crooked topknot.

"How did you get on board the flying saucer?" Geraldo said, stroking his mustache. "Did they beam you up?"

"No," the woman said. "They took hold of my arms and made me walk."

"Time to get you up," my nurse said. She switched off the TV and shoved it up out of reach. "Where are your slippers?"

"There must be some mistake," I said. "I just had major surgery."

"Herniated disk patient, right?" she said, flipping the bottom of the sheet up and putting on my slippers for me. "You're supposed to walk. It'll help you recover."

"Walk!? I can't even turn off Oprah," I said, but she was already unhooking my IV bag and bringing it around in front of the bed. "Shouldn't I have my pain shot first? Or some more anesthetic?"

"Just sit up and swing your legs over the side of the bed," she said. "That didn't hurt, did it?"

"I can't take a walk," I said, sitting very, very still on the side of the bed. "I'm not properly dressed. One of the ties on my hospital gown is missing."

"No one's looking," she said. "Now stand up. And don't writhe. You'll pull your IV out."

I don't remember much about my walk except some severe dysfunction, a rearward draft, and then a lot of springer-spaniel-having-his-tail-preserved-for-posterity sounds when I tried to get back into bed.

"Need anything?" the nurse said, taking off my slippers.

"A pain shot?" I said hopefully.

She glanced at the clock. "I'll bring it right away," she said and disappeared forever.

I lay very, very still, looking at the TV up there halfway to the ceiling and wondering about things. Like: is Geraldo's name really Gerald and is that why he became a talk-show host? And: why is it talk show hosts believe everything anybody tells them whether they have squinchy eyes or not?

My mother used to believe everything my cousin Vendetta told her. "Vendetta says you were mean to her," my mother would say. "She says you won't share your toys, that you hid your dolls and won't let her play with them." Which was a lie. I'd only hidden the doll clothes.

She even believed her about the bike. "Why won't you let your cousin ride your bike? I think it's nice she's trying to get some exercise. Vendetta's only here for a few weeks, and I expect you to be nice to her."

My pain shot didn't come. I looked at the clock for awhile, and then back at the TV, which seemed nearer than before. It was. The boom was slowly sinking, and I realized that must be how it had come to be at eye level when I came out of the anesthetic.

It wasn't sinking very fast, and I figured by the time it got within reach, my nurse would have brought my pain shot and I'd be sound asleep. I pushed the call button, just to hurry her up a little, and waited for her to come.

It took the TV two hours and forty-eight minutes to sink. I figured "Geraldo" would be long since over, and it was. Sally Jessy Raphael's talk show was on.

"So the alien took you aboard his spaceship?" Sally Jessy was saying. "What happened then?"

"The alien's name was Urq-fflizzz, and he left me alone in this room," a woman with little squinchy eyes said. She looked just like the woman who'd been on *Geraldo* except for her hair, which was a strawish yellow and stuck straight out from her head. "I was there a really long time, and then an alien came in—"

"Urq-fflizzz?" Sally Jessy asked, pushing up her glasses.

"I don't know. They all looked alike. They had big heads and these funny eyes—"

"How long were you in this room?"

"I don't know exactly," the woman said. "I don't think time works the same for them. I was on board the spaceship for *hours*, but when they took me back to my car, my watch said no time had gone by at all."

"Time to take your temp," my nurse said. She switched the TV off and swung it back up to the ceiling.

"Did you bring my pain shot?" I asked hopefully.

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"I just came on duty," she said, sticking the temperature thing in my ear. It beeped. "Feeling some discomfort?"

"Yes," I said fervently.

She patted my sheet-covered knee. "I'll get it right away," she said and disappeared forever.

I watched the TV sink slowly in the west for awhile and thought about how talk show hosts all seemed to have dysfunctional names—Oprah, Sally Jessy, Geraldo. No, wait, I'd forgotten Phil Donahue. Phil was a fairly functional name—and about the kid on Oprah and his poor dog.

My cousin Vendetta's thing was cats. She used to dress them up. Not just in doll dresses, which every kid does, but in whole outfits: earrings and underwear and gloves and everything. She put bonnets and hoop skirts on my cat Wendy Darling, and once she even dressed her in a pair of doll panty hose, though they were mostly runs by the time she got them on her.

The TV sank lower. My nurse had pushed it up at an angle, and I could see my reflection in the screen. My hair looked almost as bad as a UFO abductee's. I had only been in the hospital three days, but my hair looked like I'd been here at least six months. And felt like it.

My nurse came in carrying a big sheet of pink paper.

"Could you bring me a comb?" I asked her. "And some shampoo?"

"You need to fill out tomorrow's menu," she said, and handed me the pink paper and a stubby yellow pencil. "Circle the items you want."

"And a pain shot," I said, but she had already disappeared forever.

At least she hadn't pushed the TV back out of reach. I watched my reflection descending some more and thought about my hair and Phil Donahue's. I wondered what Phil was short for. Philistine? Philanderer?

As soon as the TV drifted within reach, I turned it on. *Maury Povich* was on. "So when you woke up you were aboard the flying saucer," Maury was saying. "What happened then?"

"I tried to escape," a woman with hair that looked even worse than mine said. Her hair was muddish brown and was matted down on her forehead and cheeks, and she had little squinchy eyes. "But before I could get to the door this alien came in and told me—telepathically, you know, they don't talk, they just look at you with these funny eyes they have and they can read your mind—he said his name was Yargo and that it was useless to resist. And then he stuck needles in me, and—"

"We're going to have to break here," Maury said. "Very quickly, why do you think the aliens abducted you?"

"They're trying to find out about us so they can take over."

"You didn't fill out your menu," my nurse said. She flicked the TV off and gave it a mighty shove that nearly bounced it off the ceiling. "You're supposed to fill out your menu."

"Will you let me wash my hair if I do?"

She dumped the pink paper and stubby pencil on my chest. "Circle the things you want," she said and disappeared forever.

"Your name is Ermentrude, isn't it?" I shouted after her.

I looked up at the TV, willing it to descend, but that last shove must have fixed whatever was wrong with the boom. It didn't even dip.

I pushed the call button a few times, on the off-chance that somebody might answer it, circled my meal choices, and then lay very, very still and watched the TV not move, thinking about my pain (which was getting worse by the minute) and my hair (ditto) and the theory that the aliens were trying to take over.

It seemed to me that swooping around the sky in flying saucers, snatching people and then letting them go to appear on talk shows, wasn't a very efficient way to run an invasion. It also occurred to me that if you'd really been abducted by aliens who stuck needles in you and left you alone in rooms for hours, you wouldn't go on "Donahue." You'd hide.

My cat Wendy Darling hid under the porch after the panty hose episode and wouldn't come out for the rest of the summer. My cousin Vendetta squatted down and tried to coax her out. "Here kitty, kitty, nice kitty. Want me to pet you? I love kitties. Here, kitty, kitty. I won't hurt you."

Wendy Darling, who was no dummy, just hunkered down in the farthest, spideriest corner and wouldn't budge, and after a while Vendetta gave up and went next door, and the next thing I know here comes their tomcat, mewing pitifully and trying to walk in my bride doll's wedding dress. The veil was stuck on over his ears, and he had a doll bouquet tied to one of his front legs.

I pushed the call button again, and then I guess I must have passed out from the discomfort because the next thing I knew the TV was pressing on my chest and I was staring into its blank screen. My hair looked even worse than I'd imagined.

I turned the TV on, making noises that sounded more like a chihuahua than a springer spaniel, but Maury wasn't on. The hospital channel was. In the middle of the screen it said, "We hope you're enjoying your stay with us!" in computer lettering, and an announcement was scrolling across the bottom: "*Sat. 9 A.M. 'Constipation Strategies Seminar.'*"

Moving very, very slowly, and yipping some, I brought my arm up and went through the channels, but the woman with the bad hair wasn't on. Dysfunctional pets were on Sally Jessy, Geraldo, looking actually kind of cute in his mustache and a three-piece suit, was accusing Rush Limbaugh of irresponsible journalism, and a hairstylist was doing a make-over on Oprah.

He had tied Oprah's hair back with a bow, which made her look like

Sally Jessy. I thought about how if you gave Oprah a mustache she looked a little like Geraldo, and if you dyed Sally Jessy's hair white and took away her glasses, she looked exactly like Donahue. Philharmonic? Philanthropist?

"The look for summer is clean, shiny hair," the hairstylist said. "The dirty look that was in last year is definitely out."

I turned back to the hospital channel. "*Effective Pain Management Seminar*", it said across the bottom. "Tues. 11 P.M."

I must have passed out again because when I came to *Arsenio Hall* was on.

"So you say there are aliens already here among us?" Arsenio was saying to a woman with spikish purple hair.

"Yes!" the woman said. "You can tell them by their eyes. They've already infiltrated the highest levels of government."

"How did you find this out?"

"The aliens told me," the woman said. "They put silver things on my arms that strapped me down and then they cut me open and stuck needles in me and—"

"Time for your pain shot," my nurse said, switching off the TV and shoving it up to the ceiling.

"Thank goodness," I said.

"Having a little discomfort?" she said.

"Yes," I said. "Tell me, has anyone ever died of dirty hair?"

She went around to the other side of the bed. "Just let me check your IV first." She patted around the inside of my elbow. "Uh-oh. You've infiltrated. We're going to have to redo this."

She yanked out the IV and slapped a piece of cotton over the hole. With her other hand, she pulled a flat strip of rubber out of her pocket, tied it in a choking knot around my upper arm, waited till it bulged purple, and then patted some more.

"Small poke," she said, and stuck a needle all the way down my arm to my wrist. "You have bad veins," she said, flipping the rubber tourniquet off and pulling the needle out. She poked around some more, pushing hard. "All right. Small poke."

"Do you think I could have my pain shot first?" I said weakly.

"Third time's a charm," she said, slapping the inside of my elbow with the flat of her hand. "Small poke."

Third time wasn't a charm. "You have *very* bad veins," she said reprovingly, went out, and came back immediately carrying two large silver things.

"What are those?" I said.

She wrapped them around my arms. "Lie perfectly still," she said. "I'll be right back." She disappeared forever.

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MZSC-9

The silver things were damp and hot and where they touched the stabbing sites, they burned. I lay perfectly still and thought about small pokes and how patients, like talk show hosts and my mother, will believe anything. I also thought about pain. And flight.

After a couple of summers there wasn't a single cat left in the neighborhood. Vendetta put a cowboy hat and a pair of spurs on the dog next door and talked me into letting her cut my hair, but her heart wasn't in it, and after a few days, she put a doll nightgown and robe, a pair of doll fuzzy slippers, and a doll hairnet in the basket of my bike and took off down the street to where none of the cats knew her.

"All right," my nurse said. "Let's see those veins." She took the silver things off and slapped the inside of my arm. "Bad, bad veins."

"I think it's because my hair is so dirty," I said. "They're ashamed to show themselves."

She smacked my arm again and pulled out a giant syringe. "Small poke," she said.

I finally got my pain shot around two A.M., just after I'd gotten to sleep. By dawn it had mostly worn off, but I managed to reach the TV, which had drooped to half-mast again, and get it switched on.

It was the hospital channel. "*Tuesday, 8 P.M.*" it said across the bottom. "*Dealing with the Dysfunctional Patient.*" There wasn't anything on any of the other channels.

Around breakfasttime my nurse came in with a pink menu. "For tomorrow's meals," she said.

"What happened to today's?" I said.

"Circle what you want," she said.

"I want to wash my hair," I said, but she had already disappeared forever.

I tried the channels again. A nurse was on "Oprah" discussing the spiraling cost of medical care, the squinchy-eyed kid was explaining to Sally Jessy that he'd set his springer spaniel on fire because he had a low self-image, and the hairstylist was on "Geraldo."

"Nothing is more important to our self-esteem than our hair," the hairstylist said, putting Geraldo's hair in purple spikes. "Without good hair, we're utterly defenseless." I turned back to the hospital channel.

"So the UFO landed on you?" Donahue was saying to a woman with terminal hair. "What happened then?"

"I can't remember," the woman said. Her hair was an oilish black and hung limply in her face.

"What do you think of that, audience?" Phil said. Philodendron? Philippians 2:14? "She says she can't remember."

"The aliens give you this drug," the woman, whose hair looked a lot better than mine at this point, said. "After they've experimented on you."

The drug makes you forget everything that's happened, so you can't reveal their plan."

"Which is?" Phil asked.

"To breed with Earth women."

Nope, I thought, not me. Not with this hair.

"Good news," my nurse said, shoving the TV up to the ceiling and unplugging it. "You get to go home today."

"There must be some mistake," I said. "I just had major surgery."

"Herniated disk patient, right?" she said, yanking my IV out and slapping tape over it. "Your health insurance only covers three days for a herniated disk."

"But I haven't even had breakfast," I said. "Or a shower. I can't go home with my hair looking like this."

"Get dressed," she said, dumping my clothes on my chest. "I'll be right back with your instructions." She disappeared forever.

I lay there and looked at the sneakers on my chest and thought about alien invasion. The woman on *Arsenio* had said the aliens were already here, that they were infiltrating the highest levels of government, but why would they do that? They'd never get a takeover through Congress, and even if they did, Bush would just veto it.*

And it wouldn't be the best invasion plan anyway. Nobody pays any attention to the government, especially during an election year.

If I were going to infiltrate highest levels, I'd pick something that affects everybody, like talk shows or health care. And something truly inquisitorial, where everybody's already dysfunctional and defenseless and won't put up a fight.

The first thing I'd do if I wanted to take over would be to put everybody in hospital gowns with no back and one tie missing and forbid them to wash their hair.

(My nurse just came in. I hastily hid this under my pillow and picked up one of my sneakers.

"I understand you're going home," she said. She unfolded a white plastic bag with handles. "This is for you to take your things home in. Your hand lotion," she stuck the bottle in and picked up my throw-up pan, "and your emesis basin." She laid the bag on top of my sneakers.

"Tell me," she said, pulling a chair up next to the bed and sitting down, "how has your stay with us been?"

"Fine," I said.

"No problems?" she said, looking at my pillow. "With the service? Or the nurses?"

*Editor's Note: This was, of course, written before the presidential election.

"No. My TV's broken," I said brightly, pointing at the boom. "The arm thing keeps falling down."

"But nothing . . . out of the ordinary?" she leaned forward.

"Well, actually—" I said, and she leaned forward some more, still staring at the pillow, her squinchy little eyes shining.

"The thing is," I said, trying not to swallow nervously, "I don't really remember much, I've been on so much pain medication. It's all sort of a blur. But what I remember was all fine. Really."

"Good," she said. She handed me a sheaf of papers. "Here are your post-hospitalization instructions." She stood up. "I'll be in with your discharge papers in a few minutes." She went out.

I got the emesis basin out of the bag to hide this in when she comes back with my discharge papers and read through all eight pages of my post-hospitalization instructions before I got this out again, just in case she was watching. I'm supposed to exercise every day. I'm not allowed to wash my hair for two weeks.)

What if the aliens don't have a Master Plan? What if they're not trying to take over or breed with Earth women or save the human race?

My cousin Vendetta had to range farther and farther afield to find any cats that hadn't heard of her. One September when I went back to school a kid who'd just moved to our school from the next town told me he'd found his Siamese cat under his front porch dressed in a nurse's outfit, a little white cap and white shoes and white doll support hose. It even had a little toy stethoscope around its neck. (I had to hide this again. My breakfast just came. Yesterday I apparently circled skim milk, prune juice, a pat of margarine, and four packets of pepper.)

Everybody always automatically assumes the aliens have a reason for coming to Earth, but what if they're just dysfunctional? What if their names are Urq-fflizz and Yargo, and it's given them NDD and low self-esteem and they're just acting out their pain?

And what if all the cats or whatever aliens have for pets are hiding under whatever passes for a porch on the aliens' planet, and the aliens have to range farther and farther afield to find something that's never heard of them?

What if the aliens are already here, like that woman on Arsenio said, and they . . . oops, here comes my nurse . . .

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Not only do I have no memory of writing the preceding (including the so-called "author's note" at the beginning), I am positive I didn't write it, even if it is in my handwriting. I did not have a cousin named Vendetta who visited us in the summers nor a cat named Wendy Darling, and do not, in fact, approve of giving pets literary names. Some of the details of my hospital stay are fairly accurate, but there is no

"streibadol" listed in Merck's Drug Compendium, and my hospital gown had both ties missing. Furthermore, there were no UFO abduction talk shows listed in the TV Guide for that week—Oprah had on male strippers who resented being treated as sex objects, Sally Jessy had on Sinéad O'Connor's hairstylist, and Maury Povich had a special four-part series on dysfunctional vice-presidents. It is true that there are several eighteen-and-a-half minute gaps in my memory, and the theory does make sense in a way, but I am quite sure I would have remembered an alien invasion, drugs or no drugs, and under no circumstances, even under the influence of painkillers, would I ever have called Geraldo Rivera cute! Harrison Ford is cute! ●*

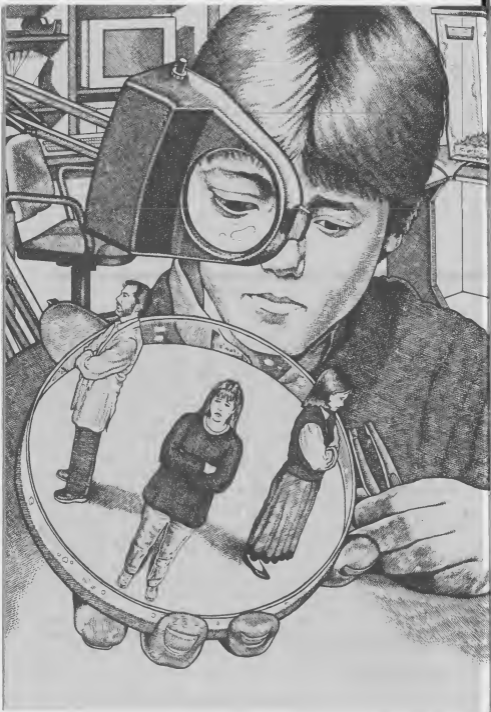
*Editor's Note: See Editor's Note, p. 63

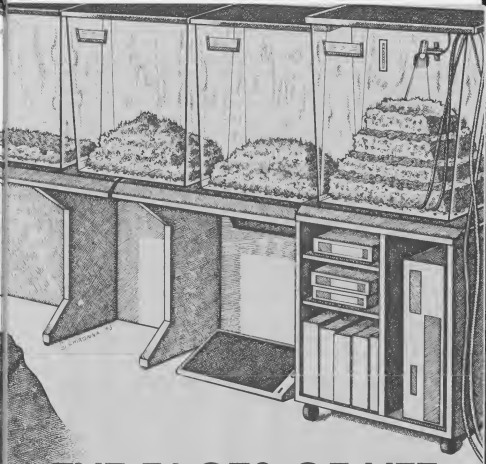
NEXT ISSUE

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THE FACTS OF LIFE

Brian Stableford

Brian Stableford is currently writing *The Carnival of Destruction*, the third volume in a trilogy that began with *The Werewolves of London* and continued with *The Angel of Pain*. The first British edition of *The Angel of Pain* will be released by Carroll & Graf this fall.

art: Ron Chironna

Benjy Stephens carefully peeled off the sterile gloves before standing back to scrutinize his handiwork through the glass wall of the terrarium. He surveyed the central mountain with a careful and critical eye, and saw that it was well done—or well *enough* done, at any rate.

Four flat blocks of no particular shape sat atop one another, the biggest at the base and the smallest at the apex. He had smoothed the edges of the steps, but not so much as to create too many shallow slopes. It would be possible for motiles to migrate from one level to the next—and hence from one thermal regime to another—but such migration wouldn't be so easy that the environments merged into a seamless spectrum.

He had decked the exposed faces of the four blocks with appropriate combinations of primary producers. Their distribution would change fairly rapidly over the next few weeks as they grew to cover the entire territory, but ought to have settled down after a couple of months. Benjy knew that there would be a strong temptation to introduce the motiles too soon, while the pp populations were still in flux, but he was an old hand now and he was confident that he had patience enough to wait until the moment was ripe.

He heard a loud crash from the room directly below his own, and felt the faint reverberation as something slammed into the wall. The muffled voices, which had been periodically raised for some time, grew in volume yet again.

In scientifically detached fashion, he noted that Monica was at full screech now, and that the fight must therefore be close to its climax. She would have been the one who had hurled whatever it was that had hit the wall; she was always the first to resort to missile warfare. Benjy wondered what on earth it had been that she had *thrown*; the thump had been far too solid to be mere crockery, but too light to be a chair. Surely she couldn't have torn the vidphone free of its connections!

There was no point wondering what the fight was actually *about*. What were they ever about?

May came in, without knocking. If ever Benjy had had the temerity to enter *her* room without knocking, she'd have complained in no uncertain terms—she had inherited her mother's screech and knew how to use it to devastating effect—but it would not have occurred to her to extend him a similar courtesy. She was only six months older than he was, and he had recently caught up a little of the difference in height and weight which had always been to her conspicuous advantage, but because he *looked* two years younger than he actually was, May and everyone else treated him as the baby of the family.

"Christmas sucks," she said. "Two P.M. and everything's gone to hell.

You got the right idea, kid—hide out until the new year.” She came to stand beside him, peering into the new terrarium curiously.

“What hit the wall?” Benjy asked.

“What do you think? The tree, of course. Good thing it’s a hundred percent synth. Even the lights stayed on. Your old man’s a real bastard, you know—which maybe wouldn’t matter so much, except that he’s such a *careless* bastard. What’s the point of going to all the trouble of paying *cash* for something if you keep the fucking *receipt*?”

“What did he buy?”

“Just trash—but it was fancier trash than he bought for *Mom*, and way more expensive. I mean, *Jesus*, you’d think a guy who’d been through it all before would be wise to *that* one. Christmas is stressful enough even when all the associated hypocrisy is decently covered up. You got this one set up in record time, didn’t you? Nice mountain. When do the critters go in?”

Down below, the screeching crescendo continued to build, with occasional punctuation by a deeper voice. Benjy couldn’t make out what his father was saying, but Monica’s contribution to the discussion was clearly audible, if somewhat muddled by alcoholic incoherence. “If you care so much more about her than you do about me,” was the gist of it, “then why don’t you get the hell out and shack up with *her*?”

“The end of February,” said Benjy, absent-mindedly. “Maybe mid-March.”

“*March*?” May echoed, incredulously. “You put all this together in eight hours and you aren’t going to *use* the thing till March?”

“The primary producers have to settle down,” he told her. “It’s not necessary for them to reach true equilibrium, but if I put motiles in any earlier than that the whole system would go straight into tachytelic mode. I’m going to use the new tank to set up a test-case for Gause’s Axiom, and there’s no hope of breaking the rule unless the pp distribution over the four thermal regimes is stable enough to allow the two kinds of motiles to establish themselves securely while their numbers are low.”

“Don’t try to show off with *me*, kid,” May said, acidly. “I’m your sister, remember. I got my first tank the same day you got yours, Christmas 2017—only I put away *my* mutaclay with all the other *childish things* when I started my period, because *I’m* not a case of arrested development. Now, you want to tell me that again, in plain English, or would you rather talk about the divorce rate?”

Benjy knew that he must be blushing fiercely, but he tried to take control. There was no use protesting about any of the inaccuracies in what she said, not even the one about her being his sister. Actually, even though his father was married to her mother, they weren’t related by blood at all, both being relics of former relationships.

"Gause's Axiom says that two species with the same ecological requirements can't co-exist in the same ecoarena," he said, mildly. "It's considered to be obsolete in respect of natural organisms—there are several counter-examples in nature and the results of several contradictory lab experiments were published more than fifty years ago. So far, though, it's held up with respect to mutacloy organisms. If you put two motile species which feed on the same range of pps into the same terrarium, one always drives the other to extinction within a matter of six or eight months—a couple of hundred generations. So the literature says, anyhow. Even in the universities, no one's managed to stabilize a situation like that. In principle, though, anything that DNA can do, mutacloy ought to be able to do too. DNA got a couple of billion years' start, but it didn't have the kind of help mutacloy has."

"Some help!" said May. "Postgrads serving their time in second-rate colleges and teenage boys hiding away in their rooms because they can't be bothered to grow up, all playing at being God. What makes you think *you* can do it if the college guys can't?"

"Anybody can set up experiments," said Benjy, keeping his temper under strict control. "Mutacloy's cheap, and the price of the tanks has come way down since they were the big Christmas fad of '17. University labs may do things on a much bigger scale, but there are tens of thousands of amateurs running operations like mine. Anybody can work at the cutting edge, if they're prepared to put in the time, because it's all so new. Nobody knows what can and can't be done because it's all still to do. The world record for keeping an ancestral line of motiles going is only seven years, and that's in a classic bradytelic set-up. I've got two horotelic lines that have clocked up four hundred days." He pointed as he spoke at Tank Two and Tank Three. Tank One—the one he had received with his first kit—had long ago been relegated to the lowly status of breeder tank. It was where he grew his primary producers: the thermosynthetic organisms which were mutacloy's "plants."

"This is in danger of becoming an obsession, you know," said May, loftily. "You're hiding out from reality in here. There's a world, you know, *out there*." She pointed at the window, which Benjy kept curtained at all times lest sunlight shining on the walls of the terraria should upset the internal temperature-regimes.

Downstairs, something else hit the wall—something considerably lighter than the Christmas tree. It was probably a bottle. The fight had reached its final phase.

It was perhaps as well, Benjy thought, that the march of progress had consigned breakable bottles to the dustbin of history. He became tense, waiting for the sound of something heavier hitting the floor. The march of progress hadn't done as much for the human body as it had for bottles;

people could still get badly hurt when things got this far out of hand. Mercifully, that sound never came; instead there was the slam of a door, followed soon after by the slam of another. Monica gave voice to one last screech. It was his father who had retreated, as per usual.

"No prizes for guessing where *he's* going," said May, bitterly, as they heard the sound of the garage door rolling up on the cylinder.

"He'll be back," said Benjy, faintly.

"Oh, sure," said May. "And by that time, she'll be maudlin drunk and full of apology. She'll forgive her darling Jim—again—and he'll make the usual soothing noises. But it won't be the end, will it? Christmas is peak time for divorce petitions, you know—not to mention suicides and domestic murders. Like I say, it really *sucks*. Not that you care—you got what *you* wanted."

Benjy asked for new mutaclay equipment every year, birthdays as well as Christmas. This year, he'd got an assay kit which produced paragene spectra by chromatography as well as the new tank. It would make a big difference to the kinds of data he could collect. May hadn't ever supplemented the kit she'd got back in '17. In fact, she hadn't managed to sustain her own mutaclay populations through the summer of 2018. Her tank had gone tachytelic through sheer neglect, and she hadn't been able or willing to take the measures necessary to prevent mass extinctions. By the time she'd offered Benjy anything he could salvage, it had all been reduced to junk. In that first season of fashionability, the manufacturers had sold millions of kits with the slogan MUTACLAY IS REAL LIFE; few of its purchasers had realized then that the chief implication of that sentence was that in the fullness of time, it rotted down into mere dirt.

"I care," Benjy protested, feebly. "I don't want your mom to be unhappy any more than you do. I don't want *you* to be unhappy."

"*I'm* not unhappy," May retorted, as if he'd accused her of something disgusting. "You think I give a shit whether they break up? I've been through it all before. It's easy when you know how."

Benjy had been through it all before too, but he didn't remember much about it. He'd been six years old, so meek and mild that he just went where he was taken, did what he was told to do, and just waited to see what would happen. He could hardly remember what his mother had looked like. He hadn't seen her in ten years; she never wrote to him or called, not even at Christmas. Five years had passed before his father had married Monica, but Monica had been straight out of one marriage and into the other, so May had been eleven and twelve while the turbulent change-over was transacted, and she remembered *everything*. She still got Christmas presents from her father, too—better presents than

she got from Monica and Benjy's dad except perhaps for that first terrarium and the supply of mutaclay. Even then, she'd probably preferred the cheaper gift she got from her real father on the grounds that it wasn't *educational*. May wasn't a big fan of education.

"They won't break up," said Benjy, without much conviction. "Monica will forgive him, just like you said, and he'll be sorry. He'll try to make it up to her. It'll be okay."

"Oh sure," said May, her voice dripping venomous scorn. "She'll forgive him and he'll be sorry . . . only they'll both be pretending. Maybe he'll dump the girlfriend, because he's sick of her anyway, and play happy families for at least a fortnight before he makes some new connection . . . but then the pretense will wear thin, until it's threadbare . . . and it'll all flare up again. What's that big word you're always using that means things going down the toilet double quick? Tachytelic, right?"

"That's not really what it means," said Benjy, unable to resist the provocation. "It refers to *any* situation which encourages rapid natural selection. It doesn't *necessarily* lead to ecocatastrophe and extinction. It's just that . . ."

"It's just that poor bloody mutaclay, even with the help of little godlings like you, can't ever seem to keep things going when that kind of crunch comes. Good thing, hey? If it could keep right on going, getting better and better every day in every way, it'd soon end up smarter than *you* are."

Benjy was tempted to carry on trying to explain, but he knew how futile it would be. May didn't want to understand; she just wanted an excuse to mock. As she was so fond of telling him, she was growing up, becoming an adult. She was learning the skills of adult discourse. Anyhow, he thought, at the metaphorical level what she'd said was probably more intelligent than she realized. There *was* a sense in which their parents' marriage had moved from a horotelic to a tachytelic phase. It had become more and more unstable, more and more vulnerable to wayward changes in the social environment. Its daily routines had begun to mutate more quickly. Was it, Benjy wondered, doomed to extinction?

Benjy silently considered the further implications of the metaphor, conscientiously reminding himself that he shouldn't be tempted to read too much into it. Even straightforward comparisons between mutaclay's artificial genetic systems and DNA could be misleading.

Conventional wisdom, Benjy knew—and his own experience had given him no reason to doubt it—held that populations of mutaclay organisms were easy to maintain indefinitely in tanks where the conditions remained absolutely stable. Such easily maintained populations, however, inevitably slipped into tachytelic mode, with each species maintaining an optimum genome. In such conditions, the mutation-rate tended to

decline to negligibility. It wasn't nearly so easy to maintain mutaclay species—especially motiles—in conditions which varied, even when the variations were slow or cyclic. Although the matter was fiercely disputed by rival claimants, the world record for maintaining a mutaclay ecosystem in tachytelic mode was little more than a year: about four hundred generations. Such processes of rapid evolution had so far thrown up nothing more “advanced” than oversized spirilli. No mutaclay organism had yet contrived to invent cell membranes.

The great majority of DNA organisms, by contrast, had been forced to exist in tachytelic mode for hundreds of millions of years, and some of them had done very well out of it indeed. On the other hand, DNA species were said to be going extinct at the rate of several thousand a day, and the world was full of prophets who did not hesitate to declare that the turn of *Homo sapiens* would come within a few generations, long before that of the brown rat or the German cockroach. In the end, even DNA might be reduced all the way to the bacterial level . . . maybe even to the point that wild mutaclay might be able to give it a fight. Surely, Benjy thought, human relationships behaved more like DNA than mutaclay—but what exactly did that imply about their resilience and mortality?

“It’ll be okay,” Benjy said, eventually, when May didn’t bother to supplement her acid observations with anything more substantial. “People can get along, if they only put their minds to it. They don’t really mean to hurt one another—Dad and Monica, I mean.”

“You really *are* wrapped up in cotton wool up here, aren’t you?” said May. “You really haven’t got a clue what it’s all about. Why do you think they invented Christmas, hey? One lousy day out of three hundred and sixty-five when we’re supposed to try our level best to be nice to one another—and fail miserably every fucking time! Do you think we’d have to try so hard, if we *didn’t really mean to hurt one another?*”

Benjy winced. “I don’t . . .” he began.

“No,” she countered, without even waiting for him to finish. “You’re too busy trying to prove Gause’s fucking axiom false to notice that other people even exist. Unfortunately, whatever mutaclay worms can do if you treat them right, men and women *can’t* co-exist for long in the kind of tank they call a *marriage* . . . and the sooner you figure out that those are the facts of *real* life, the better. Not that I’ll be sorry to see the back of *you*, Benjy—next time, maybe I’ll get a brother with balls.”

As she delivered the last sentence, she turned on her heel and walked out. He didn’t know why; it certainly wasn’t fear of his being able to frame an adequately nasty reply. Maybe, he thought, she was trying to prevent his noticing that she had tears in the corners of her eyes. He felt an unexpected pang of affection for her, and wished that he could help.

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Calmly and carefully, Benjy lifted the lid on to the new terrarium. Then he checked the electrical leads which carried the current that would warm the substrata from which the primary producers drew their energy-supply. Finally, he switched on the tiny pinpoint lamp which would keep one half of the mountain-slopes perpetually flooded with warm white light, while the other side was in shadow.

When Benjy retired to his bed that night—by which time Jim Stephens had returned, the prophesied reconciliation had been effected according to schedule, and all seemed calm again—the little daystar set in the new terrarium seemed to shine uncannily bright in the near-darkness as it presided over the newborn world. It seemed to Benjy to be as full of promise as the star of Bethlehem.

"It'll be okay," he told himself, as he laid his head contentedly upon his pillow. "It's all going to work."

2. April 2021

Benjy drew the blade of the scalpel along the fourth side of the last of the squares which were scheduled for replacement, then laid the instrument aside. He used two sets of tweezers to worry the square loose from the underlying plastic. He lifted it very carefully, trying to keep the mat of mutaclay "vegetation" as flat as possible. The motiles tended to cling hard if disturbed, but he wanted to avoid the possibility of any falling back into the tank. The odd one or two wouldn't make any real difference, but he took a perfectionist pride in his ability to manage the experimental procedure with maximum efficiency.

He laid the square in a petri dish, and put the lid on before taking up the virgin square of primary producers which he'd taken from tank one. He set the replacement patch in the bare space, matching the edges minutely so that they'd eventually knit together with the minimum of difficulty.

He had replaced the lid of the tank, and was just swinging the magnifying glass into place so that he could begin the preliminary eye-count of the motiles on the first of his samples, when the door of his room burst open. As it slammed shut again, the whole house seemed to vibrate with the impact.

"Don't *do* that!" he complained, turning wrathfully around—but when he saw May's face, he bit his lip. It wasn't just the tears—he was used to those. This time there was more: a split lip, angry red marks on the cheek, and a bluish bulge beneath the left eye that would surely turn black with time. He calculated that it must have taken at least three

blows, one of them more solid than an open hand could readily have delivered. He felt ashamed of his own clinicality, and rose from his seat in order to go to her.

She sat down on his bed, drawing her legs up and huddling sideways against the wall. She glared at him as he came toward her, and he faltered. Within the last few months, she seemed to have developed an aversion to his touch—an aversion which he found rather wounding, although they had never really been close in a physical sense. In the end, the hesitation stopped him in his tracks. He stepped backward again and sat down on the chair, half-turning it so that it faced the bed instead of the desk. He felt even more ashamed of the warm glow of lust which lurked somewhere inside him than he had of his clinical analysis of the situation. Surely the sight of her injuries should make him feel protective, not sexy? What kind of person was he?

"Crazy bitch!" May spat the words out between half-strangled sobs. "Crazy fucking *bitch!*"

"What happened?" asked Benjy, only just stopping himself from adding the fateful words *this time*.

"As if it's *my* fault!" The sense of injustice in her voice was so evidently real that Benjy had little doubt that for once it really hadn't been May's fault—whatever *it* was.

May rubbed her eyes, as if to squeeze the tear-ducts shut. Her knuckles came away stained with purple, leaving ugly streaks and blotches behind. She tested the tender swelling beneath her eye with the tips of her fingers, and they too came away stained. She cleaned them in perfunctory fashion by using the hem of her short black skirt as if it were a handkerchief. Benjy averted his eyes from the additional expanse of thigh exposed by the gesture. May was wearing tights patterned with a hologram design which made it look as if colored flowers were growing in her pale flesh.

"I'll get a cloth or something from the bathroom," Benjy said, leaping to his feet again.

"I don't need . . ." she said—but he was already moving to the door, and he had no intention of stopping. He wanted to *do* something, and if she wouldn't let him cuddle her, he could at least help her clean up. Anyway, he thought, it would give her a chance to calm down, to pull herself together, to become slightly less troublesome to his eye and his restless mind.

By the time Benjy came back into his room, carrying a hand towel whose corner he had carefully wetted with lukewarm water, May was sitting a little more comfortably. He handed the towel to her, and she used it with reasonable efficiency to clean up the mess around her eyes.

When he reached out to take it back, intending to finish the job neatly, she wouldn't let go of it. He went back to the chair again.

"It's not my fault," she said, in a low voice which was almost steady. "Why does it always have to be *my* fault? He's *your* father."

"What did he do?" Benjy asked, innocently.

"Do? He didn't *do* anything. D'you think I'd let him touch me? I'd take a fucking knife to him before I'd let him *touch* me. It's not my fault. It's nothing to do with how I dress or how I walk or how I smile. How can I help the way he *looks* at me, for Christ's sake? Anyway, it's not the way he looks at *me* that pisses her off—it's the way he looks at *her*. Is *that* my fault? *Is* it?"

"No," said Benjy, grateful that he wasn't called upon to be anything but honest. "It's not." He was glad to be entirely on May's side. Monica shouldn't hit her, especially not for a reason like that.

It was true, he knew, that his father had begun to take more notice of May, and to look at her in a different way—he had made remarks to Benjy, sometimes accompanied by a coarse chuckle that Benjy found utterly distasteful—but that wasn't May's fault. As May said, it had nothing to do with the way she dressed or acted. It was just nature; *human nature*, his father would have said, though his father had an odd notion of "humanity."

Benjy understood the situation well enough, in terms of evolutionary logic. When the females of a species reached childbearing age, they *naturally* became attractive to the males, who *naturally* found newly nubile individuals more attractive than those nearing the end of their reproductive usefulness. Humanity had nothing to do with it. If anything, *humanity*—meaning sentience and intelligence and the ability to place oneself imaginatively in the shoes of others—ought to be able to override such crude and basic impulses, elevating the demands of social obligation over the raw force of instinct. So *Benjy* thought, at any rate. On the other hand, though . . .

"It's not you she's mad at," Benjy told May, scrupulously. "It's not even my father, really. She's angry with herself."

"Well, I wish she'd hit *herself* then! I wish she'd take a fucking overdose of those stupid pills she lives on, and let us all off the hook!"

May stood up and looked around. Having failed to find what she was looking for—a mirror, he guessed—she came over to the desk and leaned over, squinting at her reflection in the glass wall of Tank One. "Shit!" she murmured, prodding her swollen lip with a slender forefinger.

Benjy refrained from pointing out that Monica's tranquilizers were genetically engineered metaendorphin derivatives, so easily degradable that she could swallow a truckload without doing any serious damage to her liver or her kidneys. Their only unfortunate side-effects were reduced

sensitivity to the body's own inbuilt endorphins and a tendency to abrupt let-down effects which—as in Monica's case—could result in exaggerated mood-swings.

"I really don't think he is having an affair, you know," Benjy said. "I think he's telling the truth when he says it's over."

She rounded on him. "Did you *emigrate* to Cloudcuckooland or were you *drafted*?" she asked, snidely. Her hand had fallen on one of the petri dishes, and she picked it up, peering at the square section of mutaclay inside. Then she looked at the carefully drawn map of Tank Four's terrain which was presently spread out on the lid of Tank Three, and studied the intricate map of squares which he'd inscribed upon it. "What're you doing *now*?" she asked, contemptuously. "Playing war games with your little worms?"

"Not exactly," he said, gravely. "I'm testing Gause's axiom. If I'd simply dropped two populations of motiles into the tank and left them to it, one or the other would be bound to drive the other to extinction when the overall population pressure became too great.

"Because there aren't any mutaclay predators yet, there's nothing to keep the motile populations in check unless the experimenter intervenes by imposing an external death-rate—but the death-rate has to be in some sense arbitrary, because it mustn't be done in such a way as to produce the desired result by design. So, every seventy-two hours I remove three randomly selected squares of motile-infested primary producers and replace them with squares taken from the breeder tank. Sometimes it takes out more of one of the competing species, sometimes more of the other, but in the long term the harvesting regime should allow both populations to equilibrate, more-or-less. If I'm right about the likely outcome, that is. It'll be interesting to see, though, what happens to the mutation rates—in the pps as well as the motiles. I think it's a horotely type situation, so they should stay pretty close to normal; if they go tachytelic, of course, the whole operation could crash."

"And what do you do with these?" she asked, holding up the petri dish.

"I do a population count on each one. By eye initially, although that's rather crude and inaccurate, even though the motile species I'm using are distinctive enough to permit it. To check the data, I use the assay kit to compare the paragene clusters of the various species. That way I can track the mutation rates as well as the raw numbers. I file all the data with Mutaclay Inc. and the State University—it's an officially registered experiment."

"Since when?"

"Since just after Christmas—I sent the details by e-mail a few days after I first set it up. They passed the design at the end of January, and I started filing the results as soon as the motiles went in."

"Benjy, you're fifteen years old! How the hell do you get to run an *officially registered experiment*?"

"Anybody can register their work," he told her, proudly. "There aren't any age limits. As long as the design is properly vetted and the data gets filed regularly, the experiment stays on the register. They can send people round to check up, of course—I guess they do that whenever an experiment begins to produce interesting results, although they probably have routine inspections too. The monthly bulletins often have pictures of kids younger than me who've generated significant new strains or whatever. I haven't had any official reaction since I started sending stuff in, but it's a long-term experiment and it's in its early days yet. If it's still going strong in June or July, it might attract some attention."

"I see," said May, skeptically. "Mutaclay Inc. market their gunk as an educational toy, and all of a sudden they have a huge coast-to-coast r-and-d division. Very clever. Do they *pay* these cute kids who develop *significant new strains*?"

"Of course not. This isn't technology, May, it's *life*. It's not a business, it's *creation*: the ultimate art."

"Like I said before," May opined, setting the petri dish down again, "it's Cloudcuckooland. You have to play this cutting-out and counting game every third day, you say? Are you crazy, or what? I mean, I know it doesn't play havoc with your social life because I know you haven't *got* a social life, but hasn't it occurred to you that some day you're going to want a little more than *all this*? Some day, Benjy, you're going to have to get out there and start doing all the things that *people* do, like drinking and popping and gambling and seducing members of the opposite sex. Some day fairly soon—and I know it's a hellish thought, but there it is—you're going to have to begin the process of turning into something like your *father*."

Benjy knew that he had to refrain from making the obvious reply, so he refrained from saying anything at all. He just looked at her, reproachfully. He was surprised when she turned away, because she didn't usually give way. Was it possible that *she* was blushing?

"What is it?" he asked, reaching out to take her arm.

She knocked his hand away. "Don't *touch* me!" she hissed, meeting his eyes again, but with a very different expression, whose implication filled him with embarrassment.

"I didn't mean . . ." he protested, but trailed off.

"Not *just* like your father," she said, in a malevolent whisper. "You might aim a *little* higher than that!"

"I only . . ." he began, but stopped again, because he knew in his heart of hearts that he did want to look at her, and to touch her, and that his dreams were not entirely innocent, and that the corollaries of his

knowledge that she was *not*, after all, his real sister were, however natural, not at all comfortable.

He *had* only wanted to help, to be reassuring, to be generous . . . but he couldn't honestly claim that his motives were *entirely* pure.

"It's okay, May," he said, when he was sure that he could finish a whole sentence. "It'll all work out. Dad and Monica are just going through a bad patch. It'll all settle down." His hands were balled into fists, pressing into his thighs. She, meanwhile, had reached up to fondle her bruised cheek again.

"Crazy bitch has no right," she said. "Next time, I'll let her have it right *back!* Why the fuck should *I* have to take the blame?"

There were tears in the corners of her eyes again. Benjy's fists unwound, and he reached out with both arms—not insistently, but invitingly, stopping half way.

"Please," he said, "Don't be . . ."

She wouldn't accept the invitation. She wouldn't let him hold her. She pulled away, retreating toward the door—but this time, *she* was apologetic.

"It's okay," she said. "I'll be fine. Just . . . get back to your bugs. Do what you have to do. Don't worry about me." There was no bitterness left in her voice now. She had said what she had come to say, accomplished whatever it was she had set out to do. Benjy watched her until the door closed behind her.

All was silence down below; peace had descended yet again upon the household.

When he was done with the magnifier, Benjy swung it back into its resting position. Then he picked up the three petri dishes and carried them to the desk, where the assay kit sat beside the dead computer screen. He picked up the keyboard and deposited it on top of the VDU to give himself more room in which to work. Then he set about preparing the chromatograms, with practiced efficiency.

While he worked he couldn't help remembering what May had said way back at Christmas-time about the relevance of Gause's axiom to the ecoarena of marriage, and wondering how the added complexity of a second generation complicated the issue. Mutaclay motiles didn't yet have that kind of problem; all the lines so far evolved reproduced by binary fission—multiplying by division, as the old joke had it—and hadn't yet produced, anywhere in the world, a progressive mutant capable of anything resembling sexual intercourse.

Someday, of course, it was bound to come, but even with the aid of the meddling attention of hundreds of thousands of conscientious God-experimenters, these things took time.

When he was done with the preparations, he set the chromatograms up to develop. Then he took the petri dishes downstairs and put them in the freezer. An hour at low temperature was enough to remove the semblance of life from the mutaclay and reduce it to mere raw material: "soil" which could be "fed" to the primary producers in Tank One and thus recycled.

Benjy was careful never to waste any of the artificial organic substance, but he knew how necessary it was to build death into the eternal process, because he understood well enough how vital it was to the business of change and progress. He knew from the literature and from experience that if you tried to keep everything in a tank alive the growing strain on the ultimate limiting factor—living space—would eventually precipitate disaster. The key to long-term stability was control, and one of the most significant modes of control was induced mortality.

"But *human* nature isn't like that," he told himself, as he crept back up the stairs. "*Human* nature is *better* than that; it doesn't need to break things in order to sustain them."

It was such a neat turn of phrase that he wanted to preserve it, and to share it, but he knew better than to knock on May's door—or his father's—without a much better excuse than that, and there was no way he could sneak it into the e-mail report updating his data. If you wanted to stay on the official register you had to be very careful to stick to the facts.

Sticking to the facts was the hallmark of the true scientist, the *modus operandi* of the scrupulous engineer of artificial life. Benjy wanted to be reckoned a true scientist. He was determined to stick to the facts, just as hard as he could.

3. August 2021

Benjy stared at the graph displayed on the computer screen, wondering whether it meant failure or an altogether unexpected form of success. The assistant professor from the university who'd come over in July to check his experimental set-up had not been very forthcoming on the subject, but the data hadn't been anywhere near as clear at that point in time.

"Wait and see how it develops," she'd said. "It could be just statistical scatter."

It wasn't statistical scatter. The latest paragene assay was quite unambiguous; one of his two original populations was undergoing a speciation split. But if he now had *three* species with the same ecological requirements in the same ecoarena, how did that relate to Gause's axiom? If

one of them became extinct, would that count as a confirmation, or would *two* have to die out to sustain the rule? Or did the fact that speciation was happening mean that the two descendant species *didn't* have the same ecological requirements? *How* was speciation happening, given that there were no strong boundaries between the different thermal regimes in the tank?

He didn't know the answers to any of those questions. He didn't even know how to go about trying to find answers. Nor were those the only questions relevant to the progress of the experiment. Given that the mutation rates of both motile species had been hovering close to the upper limit of horotelic mode for some little while, the speciation event could easily throw the whole system into tachytelic mode. On the other hand, it *might* actually bring about a relative stabilization: a relaxation toward the norm. Which would actually happen, and what would the implications be, in either case?

Benjy knew that if he called the Mutaclay Helpline they'd only tell him to carry on filing his results. This wasn't the kind of problem the program was set up to deal with. The assistant professor, Dr. Shane, might be able to come up with a few reassuring noises, if she were in the mood, but when she'd visited she'd made it abundantly clear that checking up on amateurs working from home was only one step up from grading freshman papers, just something she had to do as part of her departmental workload. She'd given him a number where he could reach her, but she hadn't looked as if she expected him to use it.

"Well, hell," he murmured, finally, "science would be a dull business if nothing unexpected ever happened. Things come right out of the blue sometimes. That's life." All the same, he thought, it would be a bit of a bummer if his first major enterprise came apart after two hundred and twenty days. Two hundred and twenty days was a big slice out of the life of someone who was only pushing sixteen. He didn't relish the thought of having to start all over again.

Benjy was startled out of his long reverie by a polite knock on his door. "Yeah?" he called, expecting that it would be May summoning him downstairs to join the others and make his all-too-modest contribution to the pretense that all was well in Happyfamilyland—but it wasn't May. When the door opened, it was Monica who came in. That was highly unusual; ever since he'd begged her to stop coming in to "tidy up" she'd hardly set foot in the room.

Considering that it was after seven in the evening, she seemed surprisingly sober.

"Hello, Benjy," she said, demurely. "May I sit down?"

"Sure," he said, getting up to offer her his one and only chair. She

ignored the gesture and sat down on the bed, so he turned the chair to face her and sat down on it again.

"I think we need to have a serious talk," she said, ominously.

"I've nearly finished," he told her. "I've just got to file the results of today's count and I'll be down. I didn't think we'd be eating so early. I'm not exactly *late*."

"It's about your father, Benjy," she said, very earnestly. "He's not home yet—but he's not at work, and the dispatcher says that he didn't go out on any jobs this afternoon. I think you're old enough now to know what *that* implies, Benjy."

Benjy felt that his jaw was hanging loose, and shut his mouth rather too abruptly. His stepmother crossed and uncrossed her legs uneasily, and put on an ingratiating smile. It looked slightly grotesque, but it was not ineffective. Was it normal, Benjy wondered, to be so hyped up by testosterone that even your own *stepmother* came to seem provocative?

"I've been a good mother to you, Benjy," Monica said, still speaking in that strange ultra-careful way, "haven't I?"

"Yeah, sure," he said, hoping he didn't sound as dubious as he felt.

"You've been happy here, haven't you? You and May get along so well. I mean, this has always been a real family, hasn't it? This is everything you could want in a *home*."

"Sure," he said, again hoping that his tone didn't sound too lukewarm.

"I want you to know that we're all proud of you," she went on, her voice now showing just the faintest trace of an alcoholic slur. "We're all real pleased about the way you've applied yourself to this clay stuff. It's not like it's a career or anything, but it shows you have real sticking power, and that's an important thing to have. If you're to succeed in life, Benjy, you have to have sticking power. I only wish Jim knew that as well as you do. I only wish you could make him see it as well as you do. Because if your father had sticking power, everything would be all right, Benjy. Everything."

Benjy had the uncomfortable feeling that he knew exactly what response his father would make to the news that Monica wished he had more sticking power. *Everything would be all right, Monica*, he'd say, *if only you had a little less sticking power—if only you didn't stick so fucking hard to your booze and your pills and your obsessions. If only you could loosen up, Monica, and give me a bit of space, everything would be A-fucking-one.* Benjy was all too well aware that a very different response was required from *him*.

"Maybe something unexpected came up," Benjy said, unenthusiastically. "Dad does odd jobs for friends sometimes—he even does jobs for cash without telling the boss. The dispatcher wouldn't know about

that—but maybe he has his suspicions, and maybe that's why he tried to give you a wrong . . .”

“That's very loyal of you, Benjy,” said Monica, punctiliously, “but it isn't true. He's got another woman, Benjy. He's screwing around. And I think you ought to be aware, Benjy, that it's eating me up inside. It's chewing us all up . . . the whole family. It's destroying us: our life, our home, our future. I've tried everything I know to get him to stop, to make him see sense, but he just won't see sense. And I've got May to think of, Benjy . . . I've got *her* life, and *her* future to think of.”

“I'm sorry,” said Benjy, because he didn't know what else to say. Did she actually expect him to volunteer to take his father to one side and have a man-to-man chat with him? Did she really expect *Benjy* to be able to put Jim Stephens straight on matters of duty and obligation? Could she possibly expect that his father would take the least little bit of notice of him, even if he tried?

Alas, life just wasn't that simple.

“That stuff's very delicate, isn't it?” she said, nodding her head in the direction of the four terraria. “It's wonderful, really, the way it runs off the household electricity supply, just like all the appliances.”

“It doesn't use the current directly,” he said, uneasily. “The electricity just heats up the elements inside the blocks. Mutaclay primary producers are thermosynthetic, you see, not photosynthetic the way plants are. They can use the radiant heat from the pinlamps, but they grow much better on a heated substrate—the ceramic blocks making up the mountain in Tank Four function just like the hob on the stove, really.”

“You couldn't just load them into a truck and move them someplace else, could you?” she said, pretending—but not very hard—to be making innocent conversation. “They'd all *die*, wouldn't they?”

He realized, a little belatedly, what she was getting at. “I don't think Dad wants to *move out*,” he said, warily. “He hasn't said anything to me about it. I don't think you need to worry about *that*.”

She seemed to be fighting a temptation to grin wolfishly. “That's not the *relevant issue*,” she said. “The *relevant issue* is that his screwing around is making things intolerable for May and for me, and if it doesn't stop . . . well, the option of remaining here might cease to be open to him. How long has that precious experiment of yours been running now? Ever since Christmas, right? It really means something to you, doesn't it?” She was still trying to speak conversationally, but not succeeding. So it's blackmail and not plaintive persuasion after all, he thought.

Paradoxically, blackmail seemed easier to take than cajoling and wheedling. He no longer felt that he was being invited to betray some essential loyalty. He tried to put on his best expression of childlike innocence, intending to retaliate in kind.

"Dad always said that the house was half ours and half yours," he said, wonderingly. "Could you really just *throw us out?*" He was assuming, of course, that the answer was *no*.

"Nobody wants to throw anybody out, Benjy," she said. "That's not what we want at all. What we want—what we *all* want, Benjy—is for life to be pleasant and harmonious. We want to be a family, Benjy, pulling together the way families do. And we all have to do our bit to help, don't we? Nobody can just sit on the sidelines, staying out of it. Everybody has to *join in*. That's what life is all about: pulling together, joining in, helping out. That's what families are *for*."

The door opened again, and Benjy's father walked in. He barely glanced at Benjy before turning to stare at Monica. "What the hell is going on here?" he asked.

"Benjy and I were talking," said Monica. "Is there something wrong with that?"

"What about?" His tone was aggressive, but not quite angry.

"About his experiment. You ought to take more interest in his experiment, Jim. That Shane woman from the university who came out last month was very impressed with it, wasn't she, Benjy?"

"I know all about his experiment," Benjy's father lied. "Who was it bought him the mutaclay and all those goddamn tanks? I've given him every encouragement, haven't I?"

"All right," said Monica, standing up and moving past him to the door. "There's no need to get upset. We were only talking. I *am* the boy's mother, after all."

Benjy could see that it was on the tip of his father's tongue to issue a denial of the last point, and was strangely grateful to see the impulse strangled.

It was not until the door had closed and the sound of Monica's footsteps had receded that Benjy's father turned around to face him.

"So," he said, with an evident effort. "How's the experiment coming along?"

"I'm not sure," said Benjy, glad not to have been asked a more difficult question. "Something kind of unexpected cropped up, but in a way that might be good. It confuses the original plan, but it might make the whole thing more interesting. You see, one of the two motile species is becoming *two* species—maybe because the distribution of the competitor has somehow divided its members into two almost-distinct groups . . ." He trailed off as it became obvious that his father wasn't really listening.

"You know," said Jim Stephens, "that woman is really letting herself go. Do you remember how *pretty* she used to be? It's not just the trunks and the booze . . . hell, it's an *attitude of mind*. I'm afraid she's not much of a mother to you, Ben—not any more." His father had taken to calling

him "Ben" lately, or even "Benboy," as if to emphasize the fact that he was growing up. According to his father's way of thinking, although he had never actually said so, "Benjy" was evidently not a name befitting a grown man.

"She's okay," Benjy said, defensively.

"And that daughter of hers is growing into a *real* bitch. Monica ought to set a better example, she really ought."

"May's okay," said Benjy. "She's just . . ."

"A prick-teasing bitch is what she is," his father said, firmly, "And there ain't no justice in *that*." He grinned at his own feeble play on words, and looked hard at Benjy, expecting an echo. Benjy managed a faint smile.

"Don't get any ideas, though," his father went on. "She's too much for a little guy like you. She'd eat you up and spit you out. Find something easier for practice. Got to get *out* there, though—won't find nothing sitting on your butt in here. It's high summer, for Christ's sake. Forget the sludge-tanks for a while—run around a little; play some ball. Too many kids sit home looking at those goddamn screens and playing with those goddamn keyboards all day long. You gotta get *out there*."

Benjy feared that this might be a prelude to one of his father's favorite speeches, about how electronic brains were all very well, but at the end of the line there had to be *moving parts* to get the job done. Jim Stephens made his living servicing the mechanical parts of various kinds of industrial and household robots, and was perversely proud of the fact that he took over where what he called "the software so-called engineers" had to leave off.

"It's okay," Benjy said, deciding that it would be diplomatic simply to ignore the greater part of what his father had said. "I'm almost finished. I won't be late for dinner. I promised Monica. I just have to do this *one thing*."

"I know the feeling, kid," his father said, with another of those grins. "I know the feeling. Don't mind your mom too much—women always come a bit unstuck when their looks begin to go. Nothing to worry about. It's all under control."

"I like Monica, really," Benjy said, cautiously. "May too. It's all okay. I just wish everything could be a little *smoother* . . ."

"Don't I know it," said his father. "All those tranks and *still* she's got a temper like a polecat! But her bark's worse than her bite, and her throwing arm ain't dangerous in spite of all the practice she puts in. Don't let her worry you too much—like I say, everything's under control."

Benjy knew that there was no point trying to make himself any clearer. His father was in too ebullient a mood. In fact, he was in the kind of

mood that May had lately taken to calling—but not within her mother's hearing—"freshly laid."

"I'll see you in a few minutes," Benjy said, doggedly, trying hard not to make it sound like a dismissive instruction. "I've just got to file this stuff—it's important to keep a full record."

"That woman from the university really was interested, huh?"

"Not *that* much," Benjy confessed. "But she did say that the college people liked my design enough to duplicate it in the lab. They're running a couple of months behind, so it's too early to say whether they'll get speciation too, but it'd be real interesting if they did."

"Sure," said Jim Stephens. "Sure it would. But remember what I say, now. You're only young once—time to be old when you're *old*. You only got one life." Having delivered this advice, in his best paternal tone, he left.

Benjy wasted no time at all in collating and packaging his results and sending them off to Mutaclay's and the university's data-banks. By the time it was all done he felt much better. Monica's visit and its aftermath had faded into unimportance.

Maybe, he thought, someone running a similar experiment was keeping tabs on his results week by week. Maybe someone would get in touch with him by e-mail, wanting to discuss the implications of the recent development. Maybe this would really lead somewhere, get his name and picture into the bulletin. *Benjamin Stephens, a young mutaclay engineer from a small northeastern town, has produced an interesting and unprecedented situation while mounting an experiment to prove that Gause's axiom does not necessarily apply to mutaclay populations in the laboratory any more than it applies to DNA-organisms. . . .*

In the great community of mutaclay enthusiasts, there were no insurmountable barriers of age or status, so if anyone *did* take an interest in his work, it was just as likely to be a full professor as some other hobbyist adolescent. The whole mutaclay enterprise was so new, so multidimensional, moving forward so rapidly, that *anything* might happen, to anyone. . . .

"The possibilities," he whispered to himself as he finally left the room, valiantly making the best of his uncertainties, "are endless. Literally *endless*."

4. December 2021

Benjy removed the developed chromatogram and immediately reset the equipment for a second run. Double-checking the assay results was

time-consuming, but Benjy had found that it wasn't tiresome at all—quite the reverse, in fact. The steady accumulation of his data had attained a momentum of its own which seemed quietly magnificent. His technique was now honed to perfection; he felt that he could have gone through the whole process blindfolded if he had to. He took a real pleasure nowadays from the deft efficiency of his hands as they dissected out and replaced the allotted squares of substrate, and he felt that the way the purple patches migrated across the chromatograms had a fluid grace of its own.

The last doubts were ebbing away now. It had become abundantly clear that there were now *four* motile-representative clusters where there had earlier been three. He felt that he had never in his life seen anything half so beautiful as the pattern of separation mapped out on the computer's time-lapsed series of images.

"It may be a freak," he said to himself, as he put the computer through its paces one last time, "but if so it's a *lucky* freak. This is the one in a million precarious situations which *works*."

He winced at the sound of an unprecedentedly loud crash from below. *Jesus*, he thought. *That has to be the table! And it must have been piled high with stuff.*

The voices were very loud—so loud that he paused to wonder how he had been able to ignore them for so long. It wasn't so very mysterious; when he was concentrating hard he could filter out almost anything, and the sound of raised voices was hardly unfamiliar.

Now he had begun to pay attention he perceived that it was not just Monica's voice which had attained its maximum decibel level. His father was shouting at the top of his voice too, and the stentorian blast was colored by a brutal anger which Benjy could not remember ever having heard before.

Unfortunately, the moment he brought his concentration to bear on the question of what was being said, the fight broke up, leaving him none the wiser as to its details. He heard a door slam, and then heard footsteps on the staircase. They were his father's footsteps, and Benjy counted them uneasily, waiting to see where they would lead.

They led, as Benjy had feared, to the door of the room in which he sat, which flew open.

"An oyster!" yelled Jim Stephens. "The bitch has hit us with a fucking *oyster!*" He was waving a piece of paper in his hand, which he thrust at Benjy as he crossed the room. Benjy took it, cringing as he did so from the force of his father's arousal. He saw that it was some kind of official document.

"What's an oyster?" he asked, querulously.

"It's a court order," his father said, still towering over him, abuzz with

unsuppressed rage. "It's a court order throwing us out of our own fucking home!"

Benjy looked down at the document again, trying to focus his eyes on the print. "What?" he said, dumbly.

"The bitch couldn't be content with filing for divorce," his father went on, the words still overloud and vibrant with bitterness. "Oh *no*—she couldn't just pack *her* bags like any other washed-up paper widow. *She* had to go the extra distance. You know what she's done? She's practically charged me with sexual molestation of a fucking minor! She's got an order ousting me from my own fucking house on the grounds that I'm endangering her fucking daughter! Can you believe it?"

The words were in focus now, and Benjy read through them as efficiently as he could, while the import of the information slowly sank in.

"She can't do this," he said, faintly. "She can't."

"Damn *right*, she can't!" said Jim Stephens. "You ever see me touch that girl? No! It's *perjury* and there's no way in the world she can get away with it. No way. We're going to fight this, Benboy. We're going to fight it to the end. We'll be back, son, never fear. This is just the beginning. If the bitch wants a war, she can have a fucking war!"

Benjy was still scanning the paper, looking at the slightly blurred dates which had filled in by an overaged ink-jet printer. "But Dad," he said, faintly. "This says we have to be out by *Christmas Eve!*"

Christmas Eve was less than ten days away.

"Isn't that just typical?" Jim Stephens retorted. "Throwing her husband and sixteen-year-old stepson onto the streets on *Christmas Eve*? Doesn't that just say it all? Spiteful bitch!"

"You have to stop this," said Benjy, grimly. All the color seemed to have drained out of his voice. He sounded like an antique voice-synthesizer. *It can't happen*, he was saying to himself, under his breath. *It can't happen. Not like this.*

"I'll have us back in just as soon as I can, Benboy. We'll be in and *she'll* be out, just as soon as my guy can get a hearing. They served this thing on me at the office, and I was on the phone right away. It's clearcut—unless they have independent testimony from a witness, or medical evidence with a clear DNA-spectrum, their word ain't worth shit against ours. They can't get away with this kind of ambush by slander. We may be spending Christmas in a motel, son, but it'll just be a time-out."

"You don't understand," said Benjy, wondering why he sounded so absurdly mechanical. "I can't go—not even for a week. *I can't go.*"

Jim Stephens paused before replying to that, but whether he was thinking or just getting his breath back Benjy couldn't tell. Six or seven seconds passed before he said, "We can't get a hearing before Christmas,

son. No way. The shark says we have to comply—he says if we're delinquent it'll count against us. He reckons we'll win all right, but he says we have to play by the rules and let the *other* side show up dirty. It won't be for long, son, I promise you. That bitch is going to get what's coming to her *this* time. I'll show her she can't mess around this way with *us*."

Benjy scanned the document for the third time, to make certain that it said what he thought it said. It did—but that didn't make things any easier. He looked sideways at the assay equipment and the pinlamp which illuminated the slopes of the mountain in Tank Four. His cowardly instincts melted away beneath the force of a wholly conscious sense of dire necessity.

He took a deep breath, knowing that he needed courage now the way he'd never needed it before.

"I can't go, Dad," he said.

"We *have* to go, son."

"That's not true, Dad. This doesn't say that *I* have to go. It only says that *you* have to go. I *have* to stay, Dad. I can't leave the experiment. Not even for a week."

Benjy was painfully aware that his father had suddenly become ominously still and stiff. He watched in trepidation as Jim Stephens's gaze flickered back and forth between the tanks, the glowing computer screen, and his own upturned face.

"It can't be done, Ben," said his father, finally, in what was obviously meant to be a carefully controlled and scrupulously reasonable tone. "We have to stand together on this. We have to fight it two against two. You have to come with me."

"I can't," said Benjy, helplessly.

A single tremor ran across Jim Stephens's face, but his features were more rigidly controlled now than Benjy had ever seen them. "This is more important than your experiment," his father said—and now it was *his* voice that sounded synthetic, unreal. "This is our lives—yours and mine. This is our future, my fucking *reputation*. You can't stay here after *this*—it'd look like you were taking *her side*. It'd look like you believed what she's saying." He paused, and left it to his eyes to carry on. *You don't believe it, do you?* his eyes said, bleakly.

"It has nothing to do with what Monica says—with what anybody says," Benjy told him, earnestly. "I just can't leave the experiment. The mutation rate is borderline tachyelic, but the situation's still stable. The second of the two initial populations is undergoing speciation. Nothing like that has ever happened before, Dad. It's unique. The duplicate experiment Dr. Shane's students set up at the university settled into a much duller routine—just a straightforward falsification of Gause's Axiom, maybe not even that. It can't be left, Dad. If I miss just one count,

just *one* cut-and-paste procedure, it'll destabilize. It'll break down—I know it will. No one else has ever *done* this, Dad—*no one*. Hell, Dad, *I can't just walk out and leave it!*"

His father was staring at him, utterly uncomprehending. "It's just a toy, son," he said, gently. He really *was* trying to be reasonable. "It's just fancy plasticine. It doesn't matter. We're talking about our *lives* here, our actual lives. I need you to help me out here, Ben. I need you to be on my side."

"It's *not* just a toy," Benjy insisted. "It's a kind of life. It's a kind of life at the very beginning of its evolution. It's trying to figure out how to become more complex, how to develop real cells, how to evolve into something better. It's not a toy!"

Benjy was watching his father's face, and he *saw* him switch off the argument and go into parental authority mode. It was just like that—like a change of mental gear. One moment there was a discussion going on, the next there was just an implacable wall. "Pack your bags, Benjy," said Jim Stephens, in a whiplash tone which forbade any possibility of rebellion. "No buts, no arguments. Just pack your bags. Pack your god-dam mudworms if you think you have to, but pack. We're leaving first thing in the morning."

Benjy wished with all his heart that he could find the courage to say "No" out loud, but he knew it would make no difference even if he did.

Only actions could speak from now on. But what on earth was he going to *do*?

Benjy was still sitting at the computer when May came in.

"Look," she said, awkwardly, "I'm sorry. I really am. I didn't have any choice—and anyway, *he* started it. He's the one who's been screwing around. He brought it on himself."

"I just talked to Dr. Shane at the university," said Benjy, quietly. "I asked her if she could send someone out here every third day, to stand in for me and keep things going. She really wasn't interested—she really didn't *care*. Can you figure that? Is it because she thinks I'm just a kid? Or is it that even *she* thinks mutaclay is just smart dirt, just something to use for playing qualification-games? You have to talk to your mother, May. You have to tell her to stop this, to let us stay. I have to keep the experiment going."

"You think *I* can tell her that?" said May, incredulously. "You think *anybody* can tell her *anything* when she's in this kind of mood? Jesus, Benjy, you must know us better than that!"

"This is more important than moods," he told her. "We have to make her see. *I* have to make her see, if you can't."

May laughed derisively. "Like you made your dad see?"

He looked her squarely in the eye. "I'm not going, May," he said, firmly.

"What're you going to do? Barricade yourself in?"

"If I have to," he said.

"Shall I ask your dad to fetch you a hammer and nails? What do you intend using? The bed-frame? Not the tables, surely—that would mean disturbing your precious experiment, wouldn't it?"

Benjy looked at the door, mournfully. It had a lock, but the lock was electronic and his father knew the code. Even if he reprogrammed it, his reprogramming could be overridden from the house's central system. He could push the bed up against the door, but that was about the best he could achieve. He knew that he wouldn't be given the chance to do anything more elaborate.

"I'm not mentioned in the court order," he said, in a low tone. "I don't have to go. He can't force me. I can get a lawyer of my own."

"My mother doesn't want you here, with or without your father," May said, bluntly. "She wants you both out."

"She asked for my help, once," he said. "She asked me to talk to him."

"If you ever did," May pointed out, "it didn't work. We're way past that now. She never loved you, you know. She never even liked you much. You were just something that came along with *him*. Everything she ever did for you, she did for *his* sake. And now she's had her fill of him, she never wants to set eyes on *you* again."

It was true, Benjy thought. It was all true, and would have been abundantly clear to him all along if only he'd bothered to think about it—if only he'd bothered to look at it with the objective eye of a budding scientist.

"It's all a lie, isn't it?" Benjy muttered, resentfully. "He never laid a finger on you, did he?"

"Only because I'd cut it off if he did," she retorted. "He *wants* to—just the way *you* do. I don't have to tell any lies, Benjy. I just have to say what I've seen—what I see every day of the week, when he actually bothers to come home. What *you'd* see every day of the week, if you weren't always hiding up here, messing about with your fucking tanks full of fucking mud."

"He wouldn't *do* anything to you," said Benjy. "You *know* that. So does Monica."

"Nobody *knows*," she said, flatly. "These things happen. It's a fact of life. Men like your dad are dangerous, Benjy, and not just because they're incapable of keeping their promises. You'll be dangerous too, when you stop hiding yourself away every night, trying to figure the difference between one microscopic worm and another. You have the same faithless

genes as *he* does, the same lying eyes. Even you can't be a kid forever, and when you stop, you'll be just another chip off the same old block."

Benjy stared at her, remembering that she'd come in so that she could tell him how sorry she was. What had deflected her into that tirade? Was it his fault? For the first time, he wondered whether they might be right, and whether *he* really might be the one who was wrong, the one who was mad. Suppose, he thought, they *were* right, and the experiment really *didn't* matter, and the mutaclay's achievement was just one more futile, fruitless, meaningless ripple in the primordial slime . . . what then? Did *anything* matter?

"I'm not going," he said, yet again—but for the first time, the words had an ominously hollow ring, as it finally penetrated to the inmost heart of him that he really didn't have the power to determine that.

There's nothing I can do, he thought, suddenly swamped by a wave of appalling desolation. *Nobody's going to take any notice, nobody's even going to listen. They're just going to blow it all away, without even thinking about it. It just doesn't matter to them. I don't matter to them. Nothing matters but their stupid determination to tear one another apart.*

Benjy came slowly to his feet, and looked at the ceiling of his room, and howled at the top of his voice: "I'm not going! I won't go! D'you hear me, Dad . . . Monica? I CAN'T LEAVE THE EXPERIMENT!"

He knew, even as he did it, how ridiculous it was. For years he had sat up here night after night, listening with half an ear to raised voices, knowing full well how stupid and futile it was to think that shouting something at the top of your voice could make it come true—and yet, when you came to the end of the line, what else was there?

What other way was there to rage against the fallibility of men and the viciousness of fate? He was only human, after all—only a kid. He couldn't *change* anything.

The echoes had hardly died away before Jim Stephens came back into the room. He was still outwardly calm; he had finished all *his* ranting and raving. He looked at Benjy with naked distaste—not with anger, not with hatred, just *distaste*.

"I changed my mind," he said, as though to nobody in particular. Then he walked over to the table, lifted the lid off Tank Four and reached in with his big, gnarled, unsterile hand.

One by one he wrested the four layers of the "mountain" from their bed, and one by one he hurled them across the room, each in a different direction. One by one they crashed into the walls, sending minute globules of mutaclay everywhere.

Jim Stephens wiped his hands on his shirt, turned to Benjy, and said: "Tidy up the mess, Ben. Then pack your bags. It's over. We're leaving. We aren't coming back. You and I, we have to get on with the rest of our

lives." As he strode out of the room again he cast a single malevolent glance in May's direction, and hissed: "Bitch!" He was gone by the time she managed to lift a rude retaliatory finger.

"Nice guy, your dad," she said to Benjy, with feeling.

Benjy didn't reply. He was dumbstruck. He just stared at the wreckage of his experiment. *Three hundred and fifty-eight days*, he thought, numbly. *Nearly three hundred generations of the motiles. Two new species. And it all comes to this. Five seconds of destructive wrath. Five seconds, and everything wiped out.*

There were no tears in his eyes. Desolation didn't permit tears. The enormity of the event was too great to be encompassed by any simple, childish, tear-jerking emotion.

"That's life," said May, after a little while, perhaps not quite as sarcastically as she had intended. "So it goes. When things get out of hand, there's no way of stopping it. When people can't get along any more, it all just comes apart."

There was no arguing with that.

Benjy, still desolate and speechless, made no reply. There was nothing to be said, let alone shouted. But he realized, slowly and silently, that the fact that there was nothing he could say didn't necessarily mean that there wasn't an answer.

What would a sentient dinosaur have felt, he thought, on the day when that rogue asteroid came hurtling out of nowhere? Two hundred million years of diversification, speciation, problem-solving . . . and all wiped out with a single casual flourish, by a bolt from the blue. Would it have cried, or laughed, or simply have shrugged its reptilian shoulders and said "That's life"? So it goes. Another world ripped to shreds. Dust to dust, ashes to ashes, back to square one.

He stared, helplessly, at the terrarium whose contents had been so recklessly scattered and smashed, and at the bright pinprick of warm white light which had shone upon the little world twenty-four hours a day for three hundred and fifty-eight days like the star of Bethlehem, full of hope and promise.

For a moment, there *was* a tear there. But then he let the light fill his eyes, and drive out all other sensation.

It doesn't have to be this way, he said, trying with all his might to invest the thought with the force and authority of divine revelation. *Whatever else is lost, the knowledge isn't. Just because things get out of hand, just because things get smashed, just because everything comes apart, it doesn't mean that it always has to be that way, now and forever. Whether it's care that does it or sheer blind luck, things can work, things can grow, things can change and still stay together. If only they get enough chances, things can work out in the end. We're here, aren't we? In all our*

awesome complexity, we're here, even though we started out as nothing but ambitious dirt, nothing but clever clay. And in the end, one way or another, we'll find a way to get it all together, to make things work. That's life, May. That's what real life is all about.

He let the thought die away before he even tried to speak, and when he did speak, all he said was: "I'm sorry, too."

"What?" said May, probably having forgotten that she'd offered an apology of her own.

"I said, I'm sorry, too."

"Oh," she said, uncertainly.

He turned to her, and put out his arms, not tremulously but with real confidence, real determination.

She hesitated, but in the end she let him put his arms around her and bid her a proper farewell, on behalf of the past they had shared, the world they had not, and the life they never would. ●



FROM:

A CHILD'S GARDEN OF GRAMMAR

LIE AND LAY

Lie, that lazy little verb,
Puts up a sign, *Do Not Disturb*,
When he is lying in his bed,
Curled up asleep beneath the spread.
Then Lay will come along and say,
"You shouldn't mope about all day.
Come out, have fun, be transitive!
You've lain about for hours. Live!"

"Enough already of rise and shine,"
Lie would reply, as he lay supine.
"Don't lay a guilt trip on me, man.
I lead the kind of life I can.
Is there a law that's been laid down
That says all verbs must have a noun
As object? Or a pronoun? No!
In-transitive's the way to go
For a peaceful sort of soul like me.
Now go away and let me be."

—Tom Disch

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GRANT US THIS DAY

Nancy Kress

The author's April 1992 short story, "The Mountain to Mohammed," which was a finalist for the Nebula award, has just been nominated for the Hugo. Ms. Kress returns to our pages with a cosmic look at creation as art.

art: John Johnson

When I finally found God, he was slumped at the counter in a Detroit diner, stirring his coffee. The dissolving creamer made little spiral galaxies. He had a bad sunburn. I slid onto the next stool.

"God?"

He looked up. A little gray flecked his dark beard but on the whole he looked younger than I'd expected. Maybe thirty-two. Maybe twenty-eight. His jeans were grimy. "Who wants to know?"

"Daniel Smith." I held out my hand. He didn't take it. "Listen, God, I've been looking for you for a long time."

He said, "You got to read me my rights."

"What?"

"My Miranda rights. I know I screwed up, all right? But at least do it by the local rules. Let's get at least one part of this right."

"I'm not a cop," I said.

"Not a cop?"

"No."

"Just my luck." He slumped even lower on the stool, elbows resting on the counter, which bore some deep indescribable stain the shape of Africa. God traced it with one finger. Two teenage boys banged noisily through the front door; the waitress eyed them warily. "Then you're a divinity student, right? Colgate? Loyola?"

"No."

"You didn't find some ancient manuscript proving I exist in corporeal form?"

"No." The boys slid into a corner booth. Their jackets rode up, and I caught the flash of steel.

"You didn't consult a lama in a monastery on top of a Tibetan mountain—old, most old?"

"Not that either."

God sipped his coffee and made a face. "Then who the hell are you?"

"I'm from the Committee."

Even with his sunburn, he paled. "Oh, man."

"Well, that was one of the problems, certainly."

God slammed his spoon onto the counter and sat up straight. "Look, I know I screwed up. I know it has problems. I've already *admitted* that." He glanced around the diner. In the booth opposite the boys a hooker sat with an enormously fat man eating a taco salad. He talked with his mouth full; she was asleep. The fat man hadn't noticed. The waitress limped past, carrying a platter of greasy burgers. She had one leg shorter than the other.

"Nonetheless," God said, surly now, "from the Committee's viewpoint I did everything right, so why bother me, man? I filled out the application

in triplicate. I listed my previous work. I filed by the deadline. I submitted work that met your bureaucratic guidelines: neatness, originality, aptness of thought. What's more original than kangaroos? Or a hundred years' war? A hundred years for a single war! So why hassle me now?"

"Maybe," I said, looking at the fat man, who had noticed the hooker was asleep and was kicking her viciously, "you could have worked a little harder on 'neatness.'"

"Yeah, well, everybody's a critic." He slumped again, his brief surliness over. I couldn't read the expression on his face. "But that still doesn't explain what you're doing here. I know I didn't make the finals. I saw the list."

"Yes and no."

"What's that supposed to mean?" He rubbed his nose; it really was a wicked sunburn. It was going to peel something awful.

I said, "The list's changed. One finalist withdrew. You were the first name on the waiting list."

His eyes opened wide. "Really? Who withdrew?"

"I'm not at liberty to say. But now you're on the short list."

God bent his head to stare into his coffee. The flush on his neck wasn't all sunburn. This means so damn much to some of them. The waitress delivered the burgers to an old couple at a center table, both of them thin and quavery as parchment.

He said, "So what happens now?"

"The rules say you have a thousand years to revise, before the next round of voting. Off the record, let me say I think you should consider fairly substantial revision. The Committee liked certain aspects of your work, but the consensus was that the tone is uneven, and the whole lacks coherence."

"I'm not creating some cheap commercial piece here!"

"I know that. And nobody says you should. But still, any good work has a voice all its own, a coherence, a thematic pattern that clearly identifies the artist. Your work here—well, frankly, son, it's all over the map. The pieces don't adhere. The proportions are skewed. It lacks balance and unity."

God signaled for a piece of pie. The waitress limped over from the center table, where the old couple were holding hands. The fat man spoke low and fast to the hooker, leaning forward, his mouth twisted. The boys passed a plastic bag across the table, smirking at the room, daring anyone to notice.

God said, "I can't just—"

I held up my hand placatingly, "I know, I know—you can't just compromise your artistic integrity. And nobody's asking you to. Just be a little more consistent in tone and imagery."

God said, "No, you don't understand. It's not a question of artistic integrity. Not really." He leaned closer, suddenly earnest. I wondered if he had any ointment for that nose. "See—there's a spectrum you can work along. Call it 'intended meaningfulness.' At one end you have your absurdist pieces. Things happen in an unconnected manner. Nothing is predictable. Nothing is rational. Godot never shows." He smiled.

I didn't get the reference. Probably to his own work. Some of these guys think the grant committee memorizes their every detail. The door opened on a gust of wind and a cop entered. The waitress brought God cherry pie on a thick beige plate.

"I don't think much of absurdist stuff," he continued. "I mean, where's the art? If literally anything can happen, why bother? But at the other end is all that tight moral order. Punish the bad, reward the good, solve the mysteries, give every act simple-minded motives and rational outcomes. B-O-R-I-N-G. And not all that just or compassionate, either, no matter what those artists say. What's so compassionate about imposing a single pattern on the lion and the ox? Or on the worm in the heart of the rose, for that matter?"

"I wish you wouldn't be so self-referential. It's an annoying mannerism."

"But you get my point."

"Yes, I do. You go for texture. And density. And diversity. All commendable. But not very commercial."

"I didn't think this was supposed to be a commercial competition!"

"It's not," I said. "But do you realize how many mediocre artists out there justify their mediocrity by their lack of accessibility? Just because they're not commercial doesn't mean they're grandly above all standards and judgments. Not every finger twitch is sacred because it's theirs."

"That's true." God slumped on his stool a third time. He certainly was a volatile kid. But honest. Not many can see the line between self-justification and true originality. I started to like him. The boys flipped the finger at his back. The hooker wept softly. Her mascara smudged under her eyes.

"Look, son," I said, "don't take criticism so hard. Instead, *use* it. You're still in the running, and you've got a thousand years. Rework the more outré stuff to bring it in line with your major themes. Tone down your use of color. Make the ending a little clearer. That's all I'm suggesting. Give yourself a fighting chance."

He didn't say anything.

"After all, it's a pretty big grant."

"Yes," he said tonelessly. He watched the hooker cry. Her fat pimp showed her something in his hand; from this angle I couldn't see what.

The old couple rose to go, helping each other up. The waitress put an order of fries in front of the cop and bent to rub her varicose veins.

"If you win, it could mean a major boost to your career. You have a responsibility to your own talent."

"Yes."

"So think about revisions."

"The thing is," God said slowly, "I filled out the application forms a long time ago. Before I began work. It looks pretty different to me now. I do feel a responsibility to the work, but maybe not in the way you mean."

Something in his voice turned me cold. I'd heard that tone before. Recently. I pushed aside his pie, which he hadn't touched, and covered his hand with mine. "Son—"

"Didn't you wonder why I thought at first that you were a cop?"

The real cop turned his head to glance at us. He ate the last of his fries, nodded at the waitress, and made for the door, brushing past the tottering old couple. The codger fumbled in his pocket for a tip.

I could hear the thickness in my voice. "Son—it doesn't work like that."

"Maybe it does for me." He looked directly into my eyes. His own were very dark, with layered depths, like fine ash. I wondered how I could have thought him only twenty-eight. The cop left, banging the door behind him. The fat pimp pulled the hooker to her feet. She was still crying. The old man laid a dollar bill, a quarter, and three pennies on the table.

I said, "So okay, you feel responsible. It's your work, the outlines are yours, even if it got away from you and took off in directions you never intended. That happens. It's still yours. *But that doesn't mean it's you.* It's your art, son, not your life. There's a difference, and it's crucial. The people who confuse the two aren't thinking straight."

He turned those dark eyes away from me, and shrugged. "I feel responsible, is all. For all of it. Even the part that got away from me."

Suddenly he smiled whimsically. "Accepting responsibility again would actually strengthen the imagery pattern, wouldn't it? A leitmotif. The Committee might actually like that."

They probably would. I said carefully, "A competition is no real reason to go native."

"It isn't my reason." Abruptly he flung out one hand. "Ah, don't you see? I love it. All of it. Even if it's flawed, even if I screwed up, even if I lose. I love it."

He did. I saw that now. He loved it. Loved *this*. The old couple tottered toward the door. The two teenage boys shot out of their booth. One of them grabbed the tip off the table; the other lunged for the old lady's purse, ripping it off her arm. She fell backward, thin arms flailing,

squeaking "oh oh oh oh. . ." Instantly the old man raised his cane and brought it down hard on the boy's head. He shrieked and blood sprang onto his cheek. The boy, outraged, yelled "Fuck! What you go do that for, you old bastard!" Then both boys tore out the door.

The fat pimp helped the old woman up. He was very gentle. "You all right, ma'am?" The hooker, still crying, reached out one deft hand and stole the old man's wallet from his pocket. The old woman stood, shaky but unhurt. The pimp escorted them to the door, stopped, walked back to the hooker. Silently she handed him the wallet. His fat hands curled into fists. He returned the wallet to the old man, and all four of them left. The waitress leaned over in the silent diner and rubbed her varicose veins.

I have never wanted to be an artist myself.

There wasn't much else to say. Maybe God would actually go through with it again, maybe not. Sometimes these guys are more in love with the idea of artistic risk than with the actuality. But he *had* done it once. That set him apart. I couldn't tell him this—against Committee rules—but that part of his work was what had earned him the first position on the waiting list. It had been an impressive set-piece, especially amidst the uneven emotional tone of the rest of his work. And if he took that risk again, it would certainly strengthen the imagery pattern in his entry. He was right about that. His chances of winning would increase dramatically. If, of course, he survived.

He had his place on the short list only because another candidate hadn't. "Withdrew" has a lot of meanings.

God grinned at me. Not a smile this time, an actual grin. "I'm sorry to be so stubborn. It's not like I don't appreciate your interest."

"Tell me something. Do you do all your own construction work?"

He rubbed his sunburned nose and laughed. "You know how it is. If you want something done right. . ."

"Yes. Well." I held out my hand and this time he took it, still grinning. He sat on the counter stool almost jauntily. I'd been right to like him.

Outside, it was just getting dark. Clouds raced across the sky from the west, casting strange shadows. Litter blew in gusts at my feet: newspapers, styrofoam cups, a torn shirt. The shirt bore brown stains that might have been blood. The shadows lengthened, crossing each other. Each work of art has its own internal pace; a thousand years is different here.

I thought I could hear them on the horizon, coming for him. ●

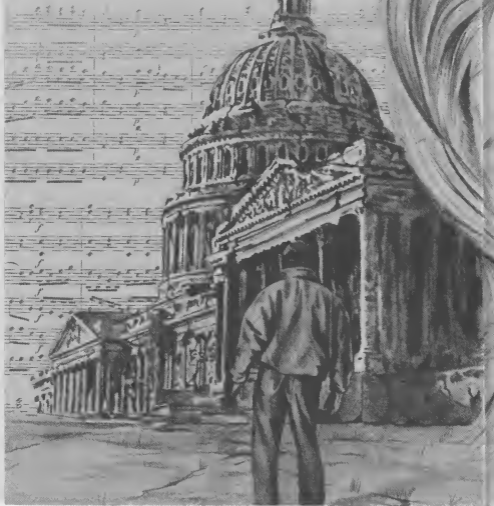


THE DAKNA

Jamil Nasir

"The Dakna" is a riveting hard SF tale of murder, cloning, love, and morality on the dangerous streets of a future Washington, DC.

art: Steve Cavallo





Theodore Janus came out of stillness sweaty and trembling, his hands cramped on the 3-space mouse grips of the audience response register, evening light softening the ruins of Washington, D.C., outside the glass greenhouse walls.

Must have been a tough debate, he thought, unlocking his legs from lotus and switching off the register console with its miniature TV screen, on which idiotic political commentators were now starting to babble. He stood up shakily, stretched, wrung his hands.

When the phone chime rang half an hour later, he was getting out of a hot bath. He tied on a robe and touched the Answer key. The bald head of Sheldon Fye of the Committee to Re-Elect Senator Smith appeared on the bathroom monitor.

Fye looked at him mournfully. "That's what I should be doing," he said. "But I have to call and compliment all the volunteers so we can sucker them into helping next time around too."

"How did we do?" In meditation Janus had felt the ebb and flow of the TV audience's emotions, but he could remember little of the debate itself. His job was not to evaluate substance, but merely to feed back real-time audience reaction to help channel the Senator's performance.

"The media people are opening champagne and writing acceptance speeches. The Senator says you deserve much of the credit."

Janus grunted, toweling his hair.

"Can we count on you for the press conference? We'd rotate to someone else, but there's nobody with your sensitivity."

"You can count on me. Listen, Sheldon, I have to go. I have an appointment."

Rikend Lord Morph-Andrew put back his black hood to show a bare head bubbled with socket-shields, a gaunt face drawn into a half-grimace, probably from motor nerve damage caused by the deep-brain penetrations. His dark eyes burned with sullen intelligence. A short, stupid Type C clone—the kind that was still legal—stood behind his chair.

"I wish to engage your services, Mr. Janus," said Morph-Andrew from Janus's office monitor.

Janus smiled politely.

"I am a collector, and there is an—object I wish you to find. My informants indicate that though you choose not to avail yourself of modern technological enhancements, your work is of high quality."

"I use a more organic approach to enhancement."

"Yes. I understand also that you have been active in the reactionary movement. But that is no impediment to a business relationship. You have heard, Mr. Janus, of Rafe Von Hellinger."

"Of course."

"What do you know of him?"

"What everybody knows. He was a designer and composer, a notorious libertine. Of the so-called Washington Decadent School. Highly 'technologically enhanced,' as you would say. He died in an accident twenty-five years ago. Some of his music is very beautiful. Some very ugly."

"Like life itself, perhaps."

Janus smiled politely.

"He was one of the geniuses of the New World, Mr. Janus. No doubt you have heard his great symphony 'The Dakna.' And no doubt you have heard how he composed it."

"There are various theories."

"But only one is correct. With these," he gestured at his head, "I can understand Von Hellinger. Without neural link you are exiled from the meaning of his music. The auidial tracks he recorded are mere muddy echoes of the neural tracks, their passion, their power. I *know* he created 'The Dakna' in link with a woman, that it was her voiceless sorrow and pain he distilled through his art. I can *feel* her loneliness, her sweetness, her shining beauty. It could not be his—he was a madman, a pleasure-impulse addict—it was hers, the Dakna's.

"I want you to find her," he said. "I will do anything, pay anything, to find her."

"Excellency, people have been chasing this 'Dakna' for two decades. For awhile, as you will remember, it was a fad. If she ever existed, she has been found and hoarded. Or she is dead."

"She has not been found," said Morph-Andrew. "I have made inquiries over many years. And if she is dead, I want to know. I must know.

"I have run search analyses on her. The results are inconclusive—too many variables, too many unknowns. Locating lost items is one of the few functions apparently performed better using the 'techniques' of your Party. I understand this is because randomness, signal-to-noise ratios, and proliferation of variables are not constraints."

"Correct. However, other constraints exist."

"I will double your usual fee, which I understand is exorbitant in itself. I wish you to start immediately."

Next afternoon, Janus went through glass doors off his living room into the close, dry-grass smell of his greenhouse. It was built onto what had been a large, second-floor balcony when he had bought the building from the Chamber of Commerce for one dollar and a commitment to renovate. Most of his plants were East Asian, a few South American: vines and cacti, grasses and climbing shrubs with tiny white flowers. It looked like a greenhouse full of weeds.

Janus put a stone mortar and pestle on a grass mat. Then he went to the plants, looking them over carefully, gently taking from each kind leaves or berries or blossoms and putting them in the pestle.

Finally, as the sun was setting, Janus sat on the mat and began to grind.

He chanted softly in rhythm with the mortar, the chant the ancient texts said was to consecrate the plants, but which he theorized functioned to calm the searcher's mind. By the time he was done, the hypnotic hum and lull of it had opened a quietness around him that held the ruined

buildings of Northwest Washington and the deepening blue dusk, the cool air coming gently through the greenhouse windows.

The pestle now held a quarter cup of greenish paste. Very slowly he ate it, the bitter, cinnamonish, deliquescent taste filling his throat, head, and whole body. By the time he was done he could feel the pull of it at his nervous system, not the overwhelming jangle of a synthetic isolate, but instead a seductive stillness as the neuropeptide analogs in the leaf paste competed with his own neurotransmitters for the synaptic activation sites he had cultivated in his brain by many years of meditation.

He had downloaded "The Dakna" from the Public Library; he keyed the stereo remote to turn it on.

A synthesizer wash coalesced from the silence. Slowly, rhythmically, a melody built itself, sweet and clear, like the voice of a girl. Gradually it became sensual, as if she grew to exquisite womanhood. Her face seemed to form in the cool dusk, young, strange, beautiful.

Then the darkness came.

At the end of it, Janus was shaken. His heightened perceptions told him Morph-Andrew was right: the Dakna was a woman that some awful thing had destroyed, and the music was her despair. It was about the Whitedeath plague, he knew, about its near destruction of the human race.

Sitting in lotus on his mat, he touched the mantra sleeping in the center of his forehead. With his last scrap of thought before it pulled him down into the absolute stillness of meditation, he asked: "Where is the Dakna?"

When he emerged, night air and the whir of crickets were coming gently through the windows. The lights of the two other renovated buildings on his block were islands in the darkness. He felt groggy, but two scenes were vivid in his mind. In one, he was standing in bright daylight in an empty lot. In the other he was looking up at a dilapidated building, storm clouds piling in the sky behind it.

Next morning he drove his ATV to Georgetown, skirting the wild neighborhoods. He wound through the narrow lanes of Memorial Park, whose wooded hills covered the incinerated rubble of much of the old downtown, then jockeyed in heavy traffic on M Street. Almost as soon as he turned onto Spring Street, the asphalt became elderly and potholed.

After a few more blocks bushes grew up through cracks in the asphalt. He parked. He was at the edge of a wild neighborhood, trees shading overgrown buildings partly tumbled into hills and cliffs with hollow windows and rusted fire escape ladders. Birds sang and locusts made their electric buzz. A sign warned of dog packs and poisonous snakes.

He had suspected the address he wanted was a famous one, and soon he was standing at the empty lot he had seen in his search vision, an overgrown patch of ground littered with old bricks, rubble concrete, and shards of rusted metal. Two shoulder-high wall segments were heavily

shrouded with ivy and bearberry, a few birds pecking at the red fruit. The heating gas explosion twenty-five years before had almost leveled the building, and weather had done the rest.

It was 151 Spring Street, site of Rafe Von Hellinger's death. Janus absently read a plaque on a stone pedestal memorializing the event. The fact that his vision had brought him here, to the best-known place connected with Von Hellinger, and hence with "The Dakna," confirmed what he had told Morph-Andrew about the futility of trying to find her. Such false leads occurred when the search object had never existed or was gone from the planet—then the subconscious tended to hunt through its own theories and memories to supply an answer to the search question.

Janus sat on a chunk of concrete in the sun and became very still. A lizard flickered across the ground by his feet. A breeze fluttered the leaves on a wisteria bush. Finally he stirred, sighed. It was no use: the place was a jumble of impressions, confused and unreadable. Investigators, professional and amateur, souvenir hunters, and tourists had been over the lot in droves, turning over bricks, poking into every hollow. Their babble almost submerged a burning scream now faint with age, perhaps the explosion that had killed Von Hellinger and most of his entourage. Ironically, the Dakna-hunters had probably wiped out the last traces of the Dakna.

He got up to leave. The walls of the next building on the street were whole almost all the way to the top. In a window on the second floor Janus saw a face.

Then it was gone.

"Hello," he called. A crow cawed back.

He pushed through arrowwood leaves to a doorway choked with blooming sumac. Inside, ceilings had collapsed so that blue sky showed over mounds of rubble grown with coarse grass, shrubs, and creepers. Grasshoppers jumped around his feet. Further back the ceilings still held, and a slope of rubble led to the second floor.

He hesitated, then climbed it.

At the top, a few pebbles were rattling down crumbled concrete steps leading to the third floor.

He climbed them. The third floor was roofless. At the far end of a big space with rubble for floor and sky for ceiling, next to a hollow window, crouched a wild, ragged figure with matted grey hair. It wore a greasy overcoat, rags wrapped around its feet.

"Don't be afraid," said Janus. Holding his empty hands out by his sides, he walked slowly forward.

The person jumped out the window with a fluttering of overcoat skirts.

Janus ran to the window. The person lay face down on the ground below.

The person was a woman. Her breath made red bubbles in the blood oozing from her mouth as Janus sat with her in the back of the ambulance

he had called, trying to guess how old she was under the dirt and stinking castoff clothes. At George Washington Hospital an emergency room nurse cut off some of the clothes with scissors.

"Sorry, we don't do these," she told Janus. "There's a veterinary hospital on 20th Street."

She held up the woman's filthy arm. Clone identification numbers were tattooed near the armpit.

The veterinary hospital had a stuffy waiting room with dusty plants crowded on the windowsills. Janus sat on an ancient, lumpy sofa.

After several hours a young man in a lab coat came into the waiting room. "Mr. Janus? She's all right. Sorry it took so long. She's an unusual model." He led Janus through a narrow hall with worn linoleum and a musky smell. "Where did you get her?"

"I found her. In a wild neighborhood, living in a collapsed building."

The vet nodded. "They isolate themselves sometimes if they're abandoned or lost. Their socialization usually doesn't cover that kind of situation. They may become afraid of people or feel that they don't deserve to live, like abandoned children."

He led Janus to a small grey room with a sink. The clone lay unconscious on a scratched metal table, two sedative patches on her neck. There were dark bruises on her face, arms, and chest. Clean, she was shockingly young, her hair cornflower blonde.

"I've never seen anything like her," said the vet. "Of course, she's a Type A. They aren't allowed to make those anymore. But she's also highly engineered."

He pulled the clone's legs apart so Janus could see her crotch. It was smooth and hairless, without a trace of sex organs, nothing but a urinary sphincter tucked into the folds of flesh.

The vet held an X-ray negative up to the light. It showed a nightmarish skeleton, heavy and anthropoidal, ribs fused into solid armor, skull a lumpish mass of bone, hands and forearms like blades. "That's why it took so long to check her out. Without this armoring, though, a three-story fall might have killed her. As it is, her injuries are minor."

On the outside she was slender and shapely, face delicate.

"My guess is that she was designed as a bodyguard," said the vet. "Her muscle configuration is more like an ape's than a human's; makes her about three times as strong as a man. The breasts are nerveless, with just enough circulation to keep them alive. Window dressing. She must have cost millions of dollars." He studied her, hands on his hips. "If she's legal, she must be at least twenty years old, but she must have been in her growth tank most of that time because she doesn't show any of the cancers they get after a number of years active. The only other thing I know about her is this." He smoothed blonde hair away from her neck. On her occipital lobe was a small socket shield. When he touched it she moaned and rolled her head away. "She's sensitive to any touching of it, even under heavy sedation, so I assume it's some kind of negative reinforcement hookup. But you can see—" he held her head so Janus

could look “—the area around it is inflamed, as if it’s been used recently—overused, in fact. If she’s been living in the wilds I wonder . . .”

“Can you wake her up?”

“Sure. You can take her home, if you’ll watch her for signs of concussion.”

He took two pairs of metal manacles out of a cabinet and fastened her wrists and ankles to the metal table.

“A precaution,” he said over his shoulder. “Occasionally they’re disturbed when they wake up. This one could do a lot of damage.”

He peeled the sedative patches off her neck. In a few minutes she started to move, and then her eyes opened. They were lovely, large, and blue. She lay still for a minute.

Then she saw Janus and the vet and she screamed. Her arms and legs strained at the manacles, making the metal creak, muscles and veins bulging grotesquely. Her face twisted in a snarl, showing the ape-like bones of her skull.

“It’s okay,” the vet was saying gently. “Don’t be afraid. We’re friends.” He took a chocolate bar from a drawer and held it near her face. “Look. This is for you. Poor little thing.” He tried to stroke her hair and her teeth snapped at him. He gently touched her stomach and she urinated, screaming convulsively. He shook his head then, smoothed two new sedative patches onto her flushed, metal-hard neck. In a minute her body jerked, then a few more times with lessening strength; her head lolled to the side and she was asleep, her muscles relaxing slowly.

The vet kept shaking his head. Finally he said wearily: “Her socialization is gone. It’s cruel. I’m glad they can’t make these anymore.” He looked at Janus bitterly. He opened a cupboard and took down a box. “I’ll have to destroy her.”

“No,” said Janus.

In blue dusk Janus carried the clone from his ATV to his outside basement stairs. Her slender, unconscious body was astonishingly heavy and hard. He lugged her into the basement, put her on a wide Oriental couch he was storing.

He covered her with blankets from his guest room, pulled the tab on a self-cook dinner and put it next to the couch. Then he peeled the two sedative patches off her neck and left, locking the heavy wooden door behind him. The windows had been barred to keep out burglars; he thought he could hold her until he found out whether she was what his search vision had led him to.

That night he had a dream. He was standing once again at the overgrown lot on Spring Street, but as he watched there was a slight waver, a movement, as if the whole scene had tilted. The scene was reflected in a mirror, he realized then, held by a hand he couldn’t see.

Next day he drove the potholed and overgrown—and occasionally smooth and busy—streets to the second address from his search vision,

thinking. Last night's dream troubled him. Dreams sometimes contained, in symbolic form, suppressed or forgotten material from search sessions; this one could mean that something had gone wrong with the search, even that someone had blocked him.

The second address was a Northeast Washington street lined with four-story brownstones, half of them deserted. Janus recognized the building he wanted, a few of its windows boarded, bulking against the still noon sky of gathering clouds. He rang the bell three times before the door opened.

The female that opened it was identical to the one Janus had found in Georgetown, but twenty years older. She wore only boxer shorts and a dirty slip, and he could see the serial number near her armpit. Her skin was blotched with melanomas and a cataract was starting to grow in one of her blue eyes. A jack wire dangled from her occipital socket. She smoked a cigarette.

"What do you want?" she asked Janus flatly, studying his unmodified head with lethargic curiosity. When he didn't answer, she went on: "They're all upstairs partying. You want to see Rabenz?"

"Yes."

The stairs creaked and the banister was blistered and rickety. A lone clarinet played the blues somewhere above them. On a dim third floor landing the clone frisked him expertly almost before he knew what she was doing.

He followed her into a loft with a vast, dusty floor, where two dozen people hung from the ceiling in harnesses, faces vacant, some cross-eyed or drooling. They were all metalheads, highly modified with the heavy, intrusive hardware of twenty years ago, bundles of jack wires taped to bracing lines and feeding into a bank of dusty black cases along one wall. A small, bald man rocked convulsively in his harness; one of his wires was connected to a synthesizer, from which the sound of the clarinet came. None of them paid attention to Janus or anything else.

The clone walked to a man hanging near the middle of the group and shook his leg. His eyes slowly woke up.

"A meathead wants to see you," she mumbled.

The eyes looked at Janus.

"Yeah, baby," he said wheezingly. "What is it that is?" He had a narrow, elderly, dissipated face with a few wisps of shoulder-length hair growing from his socket-studded head.

"I'm looking for some information."

The man looked blank.

"Is she yours?" Janus asked, nodding at the clone.

"Who wants to know?"

"Theodore Janus, Investigator, Locator of Lost Persons, Objects, and Information." He held out a card. The man's bony hands made no move to take it.

"And what Lost Persons, Objects, and Information are you looking for today?"

"The Dakna."

The man ogled him, then laughed wheezingly. His eyes went blank and a ripple of amusement ran through the room. Some of the harnessed people smiled faintly, others rocked slightly, a few came to life and turned their heads toward Janus.

Rabenz's eyes came back on. "No Dakna 'round here, baby. You can buy the disk."

"Where did you get the clone?"

"Hell built her. When Hell blew away, I kept her."

"Von Hellinger? You were part of his group?"

"Long-long ago, baby. Long-long ago." His eyes got distant, and there was a hint of sadness in them. "We was out of town when he blew away; she was with us. We kept her. End of story."

"Von Hellinger designed her? For himself or on commission?"

"You bore me, Locator-man. All this history is ancient, not even an old story. I've spent too much time on your planet already." And his eyes went blank. Some of the other hanging people started swinging, as if he ran among them, the neural ghost of a young man.

Janus repressed an urge to tear him down, slap him awake. But it wouldn't help matters to get arrested.

He had another idea. Following the clone down the stairs, he touched the wire hanging from her single socket. "What's this?"

She looked sideways at him, hesitated.

"You want to play with it?" she breathed.

She had a tiny, windowless room off the first floor entrance hall, with a bare mattress in the corner. She pulled off her slip and lay on the mattress. Her skin was loose, but the muscles underneath were hard. A large, discolored lump showed in one of her breasts.

She jacked the wire from her head into a worn little box next to the mattress, put Janus's hand on the control knob.

"Go slow," she whispered. "It hurts if you go too fast."

Squatting next to her, he turned the knob a little. She sighed and stared at the ceiling. A little sweat showed on her face. Thunder boomed distantly through an open window somewhere in the hall.

"You belonged to Von Hellinger before Rabenz?" Janus asked her.

She shook her head quickly, concentrating on the impulses from the transducer. Janus turned the knob a little more and her lips swelled with blood, her face flushed. Wind gusted suddenly outside, the faintest breath of it, tinged with electricity, touching them.

"Who, then?"

"Missy."

"Who is Missy?"

She shook her head. "More," she breathed.

"As soon as you tell me who Missy is."

"I—I come from her."

"She's your seed-mother?"

She nodded with difficulty. "Give me more."

He put his hand on the knob, but didn't turn it.

"What happened to her?"

"They said she died." Tears came out of her eyes, ran down the sides of her head. "She got sick. I wasn't there—they took me away. If I'd 'a been there I wouldn't've let her *die*." Muscles bulged and tendons stood out in her neck.

Janus studied her sweating face, then turned the knob a little more, and she gasped and arched.

He turned it by slow degrees as far as it would go in the guttural boom of thunder, the hiss of rain from the hall window, the old clone clinging to him like a child or lover. When she had peaked he turned off the machine, left her sleeping.

It was still raining when Janus, carrying a spark-tube, edged into his basement, locking the door behind him. Only a little grey light came through the barred windows, making the room dark, sleepy with the sound of rain. The dinner pack he had left the night before was torn open and licked clean, but there was no other sign anyone was down there.

"Hello?" he said.

Only the sound of rain.

"I want to talk to you," he tried again, squinting toward the crates piled in the back of the room, where someone might hide.

A sledgehammer knocked him down like a rag doll, the spark-tube clattering away across the floor. When he came to steel hands were frisking him, a desperate pale face gasping over him in the dark.

He forced his trembling lips to move. "M-Missy. I know about Missy."

The hands stopped abruptly. Then he was yanked up so his face was an inch from the clone's sweating face. Her lips worked.

"You know—where Missy is?" she asked finally, her voice thick and clumsy.

"Did someone hurt you? Is that why you're afraid?"

Slowly she let go of him, let him stand against the wall, breathing painfully. He looked into her dilated eyes.

"Where is Missy?"

"What's your name?"

She shrugged. "Where is Missy?"

Something flashed on Janus, something he had read about imprinting techniques used with Class A clones—

"You haven't been named?" he blurted. Panic blazed in her eyes, but before she could move, he had given her the first name he could think of: "Theodora! Your name is Theodora!"

Her eyelids fluttered and she shook like a malfunctioning machine, sank kneeling to the floor as if in a faint. When she looked up again, her expression was complicated, a mixture of relief and fear, hate and worship.

She had been made for Missy; her world was to have revolved around

Missy. Though she had never seen her, she had woken up knowing her and her family; she would know them now if she saw them or heard their voices. She didn't know when she had woken up from the growth tank, or who had woken her, or how she had gotten to the wrecked building in Von Hellinger's old neighborhood. Janus didn't think she was lying. In "Missy's" absence, Janus's christening had made her his property in her mind, and clones were hard-wired to obey their owners. Janus guessed the memory loss was due to some trauma, maybe her fall from the window.

He talked to her late into the night, sitting at the kitchen table and giving her bread, cheese, and apples, nursing his bruises and aching head and trying to make sense of her monosyllabic answers, her frightened words about "bad men" who had hurt her, her trembling hand touching her occipital socket. Finally he went to bed, but not to sleep. Questions surrounded him in the dark, guesses chasing them.

Around 2 A.M. he got up and walked around the dark apartment. The rain had ended, and mist shrouded the moon and the lone streetlight on the corner. He looked out over a wild landscape: ruined buildings leaning among the trees, here and there electric lights, but mostly jungle darkness. The message light on his living room phone was lit. He keyed the monitor to show the guest room where he had put the clone. The sleek lines of her sleeping body appeared on the screen. With surprise he felt himself grow aroused. It had not happened in a long, long time; the meditation seemed to do that after a number of years, moving the body's energy to different centers.

It was strange. He made himself remember the nerveless breasts, featureless loins, the armored monkey's skeleton, but oddly that only seemed to arouse him more.

To distract himself he played his phone message. It was a well-groomed young woman from the Committee to Re-Elect Senator Lazur N. Smith inviting him to an exclusive fundraising reception. After awhile he went back to bed and slept.

He had the search vision dream again, and this time he clearly caught the flash of a mirror held in front of him by an unseen hand, and he knew his Dakna search had been blocked by another psychic operator.

Regina Lady Welley had a great mane of black hair hiding all but her two temple sockets, feed wires wrapped into a long braid that hung down her shoulder. Her eyes blazed with deep data access and rapid analysis capability. Her voice was supple, vibrant.

"My friends, our civilization is at a turning point. The human race must in this generation decide whether to continue to mount the ladder of knowledge leading to our high destiny—" Welley's media technicians kicked in and she stood, tanned and vigorous, on a cliff overlooking blue mountains, gesturing upward at stars that glittered like jewels in evening blue—"or retreat from the challenges of our time into superstitious self-delusion. Already, the fearful have begun to cringe from the

demands of the future." Filthy Cro-Magnon savages backed away from a crackling fire with terrified bellows, hands before their faces; one of them looked remarkably like Senator Lazur Smith.

Janus, sitting on his living room couch next to Theodora, laughed nervously. He remembered now the skillful buildup of emotion during Welley's opening, the rapid alternation between exhilaration and anger that had filtered into him from the city viewers.

Theodora was eating a bowl of popcorn hungrily. She seemed always hungry. Janus had decided to watch the recorded debate in case he needed to say polite things about it at the Smith campaign reception.

"After overcoming the terrible odds of the past century, as well as over the whole twenty-five thousand years of mankind's ascent on Earth—" a flash of Welley's brawny figure, sweat-stained and muddy, leading a band of handsome warriors over the crest of a hill, a banner flying in the breeze—"it would be ironic if our downfall came of our own lack of will, our own fear.

"But come it might. The past decade has seen a slump in agricultural productivity for the first time in hundreds of years. Fifteen years ago, our nation's fields were tilled by highly independent Class A clones." Handsome, strapping men and women operating harvesters and trucks worked at evening in a field where tall, green corn stretched to the horizon; silos overflowed with grain. "Today, because of policies supported by Senator Smith, Class A and B clones are all but illegal, and agricultural work must proceed using the Class C variety." Hordes of short, stupid-faced creatures trampled tender shoots into the mud. "Clone replacement organs are no longer available." A young woman wept by a gravestone. "Whole industries have been destroyed by the restrictions on genetic engineering supported by Senator Smith.

"My friends, a vote for Lazur Smith is a vote for the Dark Ages. And they may soon be upon us." A ragged family in a filthy hovel grubbed food from a broken bowl.

Lazur Smith was twenty years older than Welley, his white hair cut short to show a skull without sockets. There was a quiet confidence about him, and he had smiling wrinkles around his eyes.

"My fellow citizens, her Ladyship's Party dates back seventy years to a time when the United States was obliged to grant hereditary governorships in parts of our nation to combat the anarchy and famine of the Whitedeath plague." Smith's technicians flashed a frame of a sneering Welley in a crown and purple robes, holding out her hand to be kissed. Janus remembered with a jolt that the audience had had a negative reaction to this beginning shot of Smith's, perceiving it as too personal, too cynical. He had fed this back to campaign headquarters as fast as he could, then watched Smith's remarks veer away from Welley's aristocratic background. The debates featured only computer-montaged recordings of the candidates, of course, hundreds of orations and rebuttals constructed in media laboratories months before the debate to hopefully cover every contingency. These were then sequenced based on real-time

audience feedback during the debate. The Technological Democracy Party took its readings from samples of viewers it paid to watch the debates hooked up to brain field monitors; the Evolutionary Progress Party used sensitives like Janus. Judging by recent elections, the EPP's technique was more effective.

"Lady Welley has reminded us of the techniques for tampering with nature our society has become dependent upon. She has reminded us of the clone slave-labor that has slowed the development of labor-saving technologies and brutalized our young people, but she has forgotten to mention the dark side of this 'revolution,' with its cruelty and perversions, its malfunctions and monstrosities." A roomful of bloody bodies from one of the most notorious clone malfunctions flashed on the screen, followed by nauseating pictures of some of the deformities coming out of the growth tanks. "The present Congress has begun to phase out this immoral and dangerous technology without impairing existing property rights. I am proud to have been one of the leaders of this change in the law.

"Furthermore, the tampering with virus genes championed by Lady Welley has perhaps not been an unmixed blessing, as the citizens of this nation will remember." A nearly subliminal flash of a Welleylike corpse covered with the white, funguslike growth of the Whitedeath plague flashed on the screen. Theodora spilled her popcorn with sudden, silent terror, and Janus's heart pounded in spite of his knowledge that it was an audacious cheap shot. That was the thrust that had won the debate, he realized, just as shots like it had won many debates—and many elections—for the EPP. The idea had begun to creep into folklore, though no one knew for certain if it was true, that recombinant DNA research had produced the Whitedeath virus.

Theodora said casually: "That's Missy's daddy."

"What?"

"That man." She pointed at Smith.

"... alternative technologies more attuned to life on this planet. Al-ternative, ancient mental techniques allowing us to locate natural resources and heal many diseases are being revived and studied. . . ."

"Missy is his daughter?" Janus asked her carefully.,

She nodded.

"You're sure?"

She nodded.

Janus sat back, dumbfounded. When he could pay attention again, Welley was storming: "—outrageous lie! The new technologies were used to defeat the plague, and without them we would not be here today!"

But the damage had been done.

Theodora didn't seem nervous at the reception, even when applause spread through the ballroom for Janus's entrance; she held his arm and smiled beautifully. He bowed, shook several dozen hands, watched people look her up and down. The short, canary-yellow dress she had chosen

from his TV catalogue was just right for the occasion, he saw, stimulating but not undignified, covering the serial number at her armpit. The party function was part of her socialization programming, he realized: she talked hardly at all, but held a glass of something gracefully, listened interestedly. Even when the men trying to monopolize her drifted a few meters from Janus, she kept an eye on him. The perfect bodyguard, her slender figure and innocent blue eyes giving no hint that she was three times as strong as a man, armored and combat-wired.

A touch on his elbow made him turn, and he shook hands with Sheldon Fye, Smith's campaign manager and political confidant, short and bald, with a benign squint.

"Glad you could come, Janus," he said. "You alone?"

"I brought a friend."

"I didn't think you had any." Fye guided Janus around groups of people in the direction of the bar. "You 'developed' types worry me. Our side touts these mental techniques as the New Technology, but you adepts seem like cold fish."

"Even the senator?"

"You bet. It's his biggest liability in a race with a young, charismatic candidate like Welley. We coach him for hours, but he's still too aloof. Like you."

Fye ordered Scotch and water, Janus orange juice.

"But he's still going to win," said Janus.

"Sure he's going to win. He may be aloof, but he's sane. That's what's kept him winning all these years against those nuts."

A table-sized crash tore a hole in the hundred conversations in the ballroom. There was an animal howl. People turned and stared.

"Excuse me," Janus said to Fye, and pushed through the crowd.

An hors d'oeuvres table had been knocked over, food and dishes shattered on the floor. Theodora crouched next to it, holding the socket at the back of her head, whining and staring up at two men. Janus squatted next to her, put his hands on her arms. "Theodora."

She was shaking. She didn't seem to notice him.

Somebody said: "Hey, is that your fake meat?"

He looked up. The two men Theodora was staring at wore tuxedos, held drinks. Waiters were setting the table back up, sweeping up the mess. The ballroom began to fill with conversation again.

"Cootchy—cootchy—coo," said one of the men, leaning forward and tickling the back of his head with his finger. He was short, pudgy, and drunk.

The clone snarled like an animal, her face showing its apebones.

"Whooo! *Ugly!*" said the man, rocking back on his heels.

His friend said: "Come on, Broward, let's get out of here."

"She your fake meat?" the drunk asked Janus again.

Janus stood up. "Did you touch the socket in the back of her head?" he asked politely.

"Not recently," said the drunk. "But she remembered me."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that's *my* clone you got your hands all over, buddy."

The other man said: "Come on, Broward, let's go." He pulled at the drunk's arm.

"Me and Dade here wore her *out*," the drunk hooted. "Dumped her when she malfunctioned. Know what that little electrode on her head does? Sixty hertz box, have her bucking around moaning as long as you want. Me and Dade here, we wore her *out*. Got pictures make you—"

"Broward, I'm going," said the other man.

"I'm coming," said Broward. "Sixty hertz box," he winked at Janus. "Get her going. You'll have fun."

He turned to leave, but Janus's hand yanked him back. "You raped her?"

"What are you, a Techno?" the man screeched. "She's *fake meat*, you fuckhead. Twisted genes, a fucking fake-meat pie, you—" Janus shook him just once, so hard it cut him off.

"Where did you get her?" Janus asked.

"You fucking—!" screamed the man. Janus shook him again, so hard his head snapped back.

"Where?" The ballroom was silent again.

"She was a present," gasped the man.

"From who?"

"An—acquaintance."

The man Dade pushed through the staring crowd, Sheldon Fye at his heels.

"Janus, what in God's name—" started Fye. Then he caught sight of the clone. His shocked eyes stayed riveted on her.

It was raining again, a soft, warm rain, hissing in the brush around the parking lot, wrinkling the reflections of streetlights in the puddles, bringing out the smells of pavement, dirt, and growing things.

The clone wouldn't get into the ATV, wouldn't talk, wouldn't look at him. She stood trembling with her arms wrapped around herself, staring at the ground. Janus felt the rain running down his neck, watched it wilt her hair and dress. He put his arms around her, feeling her massive, blockish skeleton. She raised her face to him. He kissed her hot, sticky woman's mouth. When he closed his eyes he could imagine he was holding a suit of armor.

At dawn the street below his bedroom was full of mist. The phone chime woke him.

Rabenz's thin, anxious face appeared on the screen. "Janus? Hey, I—what you asked me about a few days ago. There's something you might want to know."

"What?"

"Not on the phone. You come out here. Now. Bring your debit card."

Before he went out, Janus leaned over the clone sleeping peacefully in his bed, gently smoothed a lock of blonde hair out of her face.

The mist was thick in Northeast too, seeming to absorb the sound of Janus's pounding on the street door of Rabenz's building. After five minutes, in a rage, he threw his shoulder against it and it burst inward, a piece of metal jingling along the floor. He climbed the stairs to where he had seen Rabenz before. The loft was empty except for harness hooks in the ceiling and walls. He went through the whole building. Except for a couple of rooms with sagging cots and a few wretched belongings, the place showed no signs of occupancy.

When he got back to his apartment and opened the door, Theodora was lying nearly decapitated in a pool of blood.

... one of his hands white on the door jamb, he saw as darkness cleared, replaced by spinning, everything spinning sickeningly. He was standing over her. Her face was wax-grey, coarse. Her hands lay stiff and blade-like near her shoulders, covered with gore. She had torn out her own throat, he saw. The phone console near her was switched on, the line dead. He turned it off with a hand that felt nothing. He was standing at the window. The street and sky were empty.

He drove into the wilds of Maryland, hulks of frame houses grown with vines and moss leaning on grassy hills and in stands of trees. In the city church bells were ringing, ringing as they still did every noon for the dead, the two-thirds of the human race the Whitedeath had taken seventy years ago. Janus took a dirt track up a hill. In a glade near the top he dug a hole, working until late afternoon to make it deep, deaf to the songs of the birds and numb to the breeze, a bundle wrapped in sheets lying nearby on the grass. Finally he climbed out of the hole and lowered the bundle in. Then he filled the hole and packed down the earth.

He sat the rest of the afternoon and the cool evening at the foot of the grave, barely breathing, his mind deep in fields of light, searching for her.

But as is the case with the dead, he couldn't come to her. She had gone too fast, too far.

He roused himself in cool purple dusk, his car-phone ringing.

It was Sheldon Fye. "Ted, can you come down to the office this evening? It's important."

"No."

Fye studied him as if trying to read his mood over the video link.

"Well, let's at least secure ourselves," he said finally. There was static while he switched on scramblers, then he was back, a little staticky.

"The senator's off making TV ads, otherwise he'd speak with you himself," said Fye. "You know how he values your contributions to the cause. If I didn't know your dedication so well, I'd be ashamed to ask another favor of you."

Janus sat silent in the cricket-trilled dusk.

"To be frank, Ted, a matter you're apparently involved in could embarrass the senator. The clone you brought to the fundraiser last night—we found out she was a clone from Dan Broward, who was—is on the senator's staff—"

"The clone's dead, Sheldon," Janus cut him off.

Fye looked at him curiously. "I'm sorry."

"She killed herself. Cut her throat with her hands."

"My God. A malfunction?"

"I don't think so. I think someone gave her her deathcode. Called on the phone and said it to her."

"But—who would do a thing like that?"

"Normally only a clone's owner would know its deathcode."

Fye waited.

"Did Smith ever have a daughter, Sheldon?"

"May I ask who you're working for on this, Janus?"

"Confidential."

"Is it someone who could be interested in hurting the senator politically? A Techno political operative like Rikend Lord Morph-Andrew, for example, who could be using you—manipulating you—for that purpose?"

"Maybe."

"And you'd go along with that?"

"Maybe."

"I don't understand. You, of all people."

Janus said: "Do you believe that campaign stuff the senator gives out, about clones having human attributes?"

"Of course I do."

"Then I'll leave it at this: someone was killed. I'm going to find out why and by whom."

"You don't think the senator—"

"I don't know."

They stared at each other, and then Fye let out his breath. "You're a dedicated man. I'm glad you're with us and not against us. Look, I'll tell you what we know about the clone. Then you'll understand why we're so sensitive.

"Janus, over the past few years the Party has started to make a difference, slowly but surely—first with the clone restrictions, then the environmental regulations, soon the DNA research restrictions and the funding for paranormal research. We're beginning to break the metal-heads' hold on the country. In the early days—back before your time—that seemed impossible.

"But things are at a delicate stage. We need to win this election to keep our agenda on track. We think we have it in the bag, but the margin is small and the least breath of scandal could blow up in our faces."

He took a deep breath. "Yes, the senator had a daughter, a long time ago, named Melissa. The clones—half a dozen of them—were a present from the senator for her twenty-third birthday. They were seeded from Missy, so they looked exactly like her. After she died they were sold off.

"She got some viral strain—an offshoot of the Whitedeath, I guess. Such things were still floating around back then. She had been keeping—bad company. It almost killed Lazur. She was his only child. Of course, she was immediately quarantined and euthanatized in accordance with the law. By the time Lazur heard about it, she was—gone." He sat silent for a minute. "Look, the clones were a foolish indulgence by the senator before the Party's clone rights platform had really developed. But do you think the voters will understand that? And that bastard Broward admits accepting her from Morph-Andrew and then abusing her; to keep him quiet, we're having to keep him on the payroll. You understand why we're worried about this coming out?"

Rikend Lord Morph-Andrew's enormous concrete castle stood in moonless blackness on Sugarloaf Mountain, thirty miles north of Washington. An aging Type B clone opened metal gates for the ATV as if Janus was expected, and a butler led him down a high, echoing hall with carved stone walls and an arched, frescoed ceiling, into a dark, churchlike place. All around was the quiet hum of supercooled circuitry. Janus felt an attention sweep him, part human, but huge and chill.

The only light came from a dais near the middle of the darkness. A man sat on a throne atop it, linked to the banks of processors through hundreds of wires running from his head and neck; tubes of liquid ran to nozzles in his arms and legs. A naked woman slept at his feet, her face in shadow.

As Janus came closer, a voice, deep and amplified, boomed from the ceiling: "Good evening, Mr. Janus. I have been expecting you." Morph-Andrew's lips didn't move, but his eyes blazed down at Janus with unearthly intelligence. "You have a question to ask me. I know what it is. I have computed it. I have computed all of your actions, your thoughts, your whole life. It took a small part of my capacity." He laughed thunderously, though his lips only smiled. "Finding lost trinkets and curing psychosomatic diseases may gain your Party a passing popularity, but in the long run we will win, Mr. Janus, because we have intelligence. We are expanding knowledge and technique beyond anything you can imagine. With these implants I can travel to other worlds aboard a space probe. I can solve tenth-order differential polynomials in seconds. I can make a simulation model of a man's life, know his thoughts."

Janus let his eyes close, his breath relax, the ocean of silence rising within him. He could see Morph-Andrew's aura, throbbing and yellow, shot through with needles of black.

"You're ill," he said tiredly, his voice flat and small in the huge space. "If you keep using that machinery, you're going to die."

"I am more alive than you will ever be," boomed Morph-Andrew, but Janus thought he felt a chill of fear. "Do you not want to know the answer to your question?"

"Yes."

"Then listen: no, I did not kill her. Yes, I did give her to your senator's

aides, who tortured her and threw her into the street. Beautiful, isn't it, the regard for life your Party observes? Why did I arrange for you to find her? That will become clear as events unfold. You have been my tool, and you will continue to be my tool."

"Don't bet on it."

"You have no choice. You will act according to your nature. I have computed it.

"But look. I have a gift for you before you return to your hovel. Look."

The sleeping woman stirred, then slowly sat up, golden hair falling about her shoulders. Janus's heart pounded. It was Theodora. But as she turned to face him, he saw that this one had hair on its pubis.

"I bought a batch of them years ago, in their growth tanks," said Morph-Andrew. "Not all of them were engineered like the one you had before. This one has genitalia and a human skeleton. She is physically indistinguishable from her seed-mother. But in every other way she is identical to her clone-sister. You are lucky, Mr. Janus—few men have such a second chance."

A light was burning in the second story of the Capitol Hill mansion Janus and the clone pulled up to two hours later, the clone now wearing Janus's raincoat. A faint smell of roses hung in the still air. Janus rang, and in a minute the door was opened by Lazur Smith himself, in slacks and a dress shirt though it was nearly 3 a.m.

He was even more impressive in person than on TV: very tall, still handsome despite his sixty-odd years, with a quiet magnetism—what in politics they called "charisma," but which Janus knew was the palpable field of a nervous system cultured by over forty years of meditation. Unlike Janus, who had spent his career experimenting with the ancient techniques for clairvoyance, Smith had focused on the projective techniques—rapport, communication, persuasion.

And the day they learn to broadcast that on TV, thought Janus, there won't be a Techno left in Congress.

He said quietly: "Hello, Lazur," trying to suppress his pride in the man.

"Hello, Ted," said Smith just as quietly. "Come on in." He didn't seem surprised by the hour of the visit. It was as if he had been expecting them, though he didn't boast as Morph-Andrew had.

He led them through a dark hall on soft carpeting, up a wide staircase, and into a big, comfortable study lined with antique paper books that gave it a faintly musty smell.

As soon as he had shut the door, Smith turned and held his hands out to the clone. "Come here, young lady."

She hesitated, then walked to him. He took her hands and stared into her face.

"So beautiful," he breathed. "Just like your seed-mother." He sat her in an armchair, sat in another himself. "Von Hellinger was a genius, whatever else he was."

"What else was he?" asked Janus.

"A seducer and corrupter. And a murderer."

"Who did he murder?"

"My daughter." He looked slowly from the clone to Janus. "But you know this."

Janus thought fast. "An Akashic search I ran in connection with an inquiry—"

"Yes," said Smith. "Sheldon thought we could divert you by telling you half the story, but I knew differently. You're good, Janus. I ought to try that leaf-muck you swill. My constituents would never understand, though, if it got out. They'd think I was on drugs."

He laughed. Then his face became slowly grave. Janus felt himself being drawn into the man's mood; he hung on his words as Smith began quietly to talk: "Melissa met Von Hellinger at some Georgetown party when she was in college. I should have taken better care of her. She was wild after her mother died, and I was busy with politics, trying to break the metal-heads' hold on the nation.

"He was all the things fascinating to a young girl: an artist beginning to be famous, a pleasure impulse addict with strange friends, a depressive bursting with existential self-pity. And, of course, he was a metal-head. We forget how fashionable that was at one time.

"She began living with him and his entourage in a tenement in some artists' neighborhood. I tried to keep it quiet, especially the set of body-guard clones she persuaded me to commission him to design. Even with the income from his compositions he always needed money to support his habits, his gambling debts, his wild parties.

"They lived together for several years, and I rarely saw them. I was busy, and Von Hellinger and I detested each other. Then one night my daughter appeared at my door, crying. I took her in my arms, and something brushed my hand. To my horror there was a deep-brain hookup in her head—just like that one." He pointed to the clone, who sat blankly, as if she wasn't hearing any of this.

"I told her to get out and never come back.

"She never did. Von Hellinger infected her with a Whitedeath viral mutation one of his depraved followers managed to isolate, linked himself to her deep-brain penetration, and wrote a symphony."

"The Dakna," Janus breathed, and the horror in his own voice surprised him.

"Yes." Smith sat brooding, his feelings settling like a heavy blanket on Janus and the clone. "When he was finished with her, he called the Health Department police, pretending he had just found her. I suppose by that time she couldn't tell them what he had done. Because it was a low-infectivity mutation, only she had to be incinerated. They quarantined Von Hellinger and his people for a few weeks, then let them go. I sold the clones several months after her death, some still in their growth tanks."

There was a heavy silence after he was done talking, that Janus finally broke with an effort.

"I think I can tell the rest of it," he said slowly. "The clones you sold fell into Rikend Morph-Andrew's hands. He must have run across information about your daughter and Von Hellinger, and calculated that the clones could be used to embarrass you politically. But he knew that if the Technos released the information, it might not be believed, or you might get a sympathy backlash. So he planted the clone on a couple of your aides. That didn't get the story public; they just tortured her and threw her out. So he called me with a phony story about the Dakna, got me to run a search that led me to the closest still-extant links to her, one of which was the clone. Very clever.

"But there are still two loose ends. First, when I ran my searches on the Dakna, I was apparently blocked before I got to the clones. There are probably only a couple of dozen people in the country who have been meditating long enough to block me, and most of them work for security firms. Why would any of them be interested in the Dakna?

"Second, someone killed the clone Morph-Andrew led me to." Smith looked blankly at the new clone. "No, this is a replacement. The first clone was killed yesterday. Somebody gave her her deathcode. Over the phone. I was lured out of the house by a call from an informant, and when I came back—" His voice shook, cracked. "Who would have done that? Deathcode information is private; only a clone's owner would know it—or former owner. Maybe the same owner who might have some connection to an old Techno beatnik named Rabenz, a strong enough connection to convince him to call me with a phony story to get me out of my house—a connection like, for example, that he used Rabenz years ago as a spy to get inside information on Von Hellinger and his daughter."

"You're not accusing me, surely, of—" said Smith slowly, his brow knitted. "Are you in league with the Technos now, Ted? The metal-heads?"

Janus could feel the hypnotic concentration of the man's brain on him. "You know I'm not. If I had been, I wouldn't have come to you with this. I would have had Morph-Andrew get me phone company records to see if you made calls to Rabenz and my apartment yesterday. He's probably still got the connections to do that, even though he's just an honorary figure now. Well, I can still ask him." With an effort, he stood up. "I'm sure what I find will clear you. I'm sorry, Lazur. I shouldn't have come. I guess I was hoping you could give me some magic answers—"

But Smith was looking at the clone. "Do you know Missy, my dear?" he asked her gently.

"Yes." At the name she sat up, face alert.

"And you would recognize her and obey her anywhere, wouldn't you?"

Eagerly: "Yes."

Smith said: "Melissa."

One of the bookshelf-covered walls slid aside, and behind it was a

room, a small bedroom crowded with medical machines, one wall a holo-window of a summer day. Next to the bed was a wheelchair, and in the wheelchair was a nightmare of twisted bones and eaten flesh, hairless skin mottled scar-pink. Tubes and wires from the machines ran to its skeletal limbs.

Smith said again, very gently: "Melissa."

The thing's skinned-over eyes rolled in their sockets. "Ahhh," it croaked, a moan of pain as much as acknowledgement.

"I took her from the euthanatorium myself, in my own arms," said Smith dreamily. "My subcommittee oversaw the Public Health Department, and I knew the Washington Director, and I bribed him to let me take her, then made sure he was inspecting Von Hellinger's building when the explosion came. It was a mild case, low-infectivity. She got better—"

"The explosion—the explosion that killed Von Hellinger and his group—you arranged—"

"Melissa," Smith said gently to the thing in the wheelchair. "One of your clones is here, and a man named Janus who wants to take you from me. You must tell your clone what to do. Tell her: 'Kill Janus.' Tell her: 'Kill Janus.'"

The study door was locked, immovable against Janus's panicked hands.

"Kill Janus, kill Janus," parroted the thing in a piping voice.

The clone's head was cocked, listening for the voice she was hard-wired to recognize.

"Tell her again, Melissa."

"Kill Janus, kill Janus," piped the thing.

The clone shivered. "That's not Missy," she said tightly.

Janus laughed then, with a note of hysteria. "Morph-Andrew. Morph-Andrew's hot-wired her, Lazur."

"A malfunction," said Smith. "A dangerous malfunction, though not the kind I would have told the police made her kill you." He took a spark-tube from his pocket. "I'm sorry, Janus, I'll have to kill you myself. You were sent here by Morph-Andrew to attack me—"

He turned to the clone, who was looking from him to Janus in confusion, and said loudly and clearly: "*Missy is dead. Long live Missy.*"

The clone jerked back as if hit and her hands sprang bladelike to her neck. But before they touched it she froze, began to tremble, then slowly relaxed.

"*Missy is dead. Long live Missy,*" Smith thundered. "*Missy is dead. Long live Missy.*" The room was suddenly filled with searing anger like invisible flames.

Again the glassy-eyed, reflexive jerk, the bladelike hands, again the hot-wired interruption of the deathcode response.

But from the room behind the wall a sound came. A rasping, choking gurgle like the laughter of Death, a heavy spattering of liquid—

They turned to see the figure in the wheelchair, withered hands like

blades covered with gore, head hanging from a spit of bone, dark blood soaking white hospital clothes—

“—a political season like none in history,” exulted the news analyst on Janus’s living room screen. “The Lazur Smith scandal, in which a prominent Evolutionary Progress Party Senator has pled guilty to arranging the bombing death of his daughter and her lover, then hiding a clone infected with a Whitedeathlike disease in the mistaken belief that *she* was his daughter, is only the beginning. In fact, the scandal, which initially dealt a serious blow to the EPP’s showing in the polls, now appears to have *improved* the Party’s chances in November’s elections. This because of the incredible discovery that the inspiration for composer Rafe Von Hellinger’s famous symphony ‘The Dakna,’ *was a clone*. Scientists using brain tissue gathered in an autopsy now say conclusively that Senator Smith’s clone was the source of the neural tracks recorded by Von Hellinger as part of the symphony said to embody the quintessential humanity of the twenty-first century. Suffering from a Whitedeathlike viral mutation, the clone’s anguish produced some of the most hauntingly human music in history.

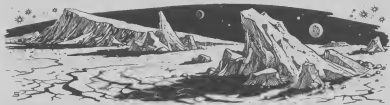
“Coming only a month before the Congressional elections, this revelation has turned many voters toward the EPP, whose platforms have long included a clone human rights plank—”

Janus hit the Off button and rainy, deep grey dusk filled the apartment. He went to a window, opened it. A cold, wet wind gusted fitfully, hissing through the trees and bushes around the ruined buildings on his street. He filled his lungs with it to get the smell of police stations and courtrooms out of them, then turned around abruptly, willing himself to see Theodora in the lithe, blonde figure on the couch.

The clone Morph-Andrew had given him, newly out of her growth tank, still unnamed, almost experienceless, looked blankly back at him.

He pointed to the guest room.

“You can sleep in there,” he said. ●



THE COOL PLACE

Holly Wade

"The Cool Place" is the author's second sale and her first to *Asimov's*. The story was written at the 1992 Clarion West Writer's Workshop—the week Pat Cadigan was teaching. Originally from Seattle, Washington, Ms. Wade and her cat Mariko recently moved to Clarksville, Arkansas. The author now works for the University of the Ozarks as assistant registrar.

Dylan laid the envelope down on the windowsill and pulled up a chair. Below, a bearded mountain-man from the Blessed Redeemer Rescue Mission tore chunks of bread and scattered them across the empty parking lot. The blacktop, the mountain-man's faded denims, the jerking pigeons, even the bread, reflected the static grey of the overcast sky. A television flickered black and white through an upper-story window at the Mission, as it did every night, as it would until three in the morning.

The envelope teetered on the windowsill, rocked by the breeze. He could make a game of it—wait five minutes, and if it didn't blow out onto the parking lot, open it.

His address was typed on the front, the clumsy characters struck into the paper, filled with the almost-black, mostly grey ink of a cloth ribbon. No stamp—he'd found it on the studio floor, beneath the open window, a few pigeon feathers drifting across it. No return address but "The Cool Place."

When she'd left him, she'd said, "If you haven't heard from me in a year, you'll know. No answer is an answer."

It was a year to the day.

But he was afraid of what her answer might be. God knows, the return address was disturbing enough.

A year ago, Dylan sat on the windowsill and listened as Lucy read from the page still rolled in her manual typewriter.

"Not too many people know about the Cool Place. It's a part of the city that hides itself and waits for the right person to come along. Pass, and the doors open. Fail, and you never know it's there.

"The Cool Place is a street, a neighborhood, a city, a world. Biker Babes Delivering Flowers, Inc., has its headquarters there; its employees roar up on Harleys and deliver flowers to your booth at Tex Libris's Bookstore and Grill. The Cool Place is where you can chat up the leather-daddy bakers at Discipline Donuts. The All Night Office Supply Store is in the Cool Place, too; there you can drink espresso while you run your photocopies and shop for a new silver paint-pen.

"The Cool Place is where you learn the secret hand-signal that says: I'm not (a person of color/socialist/sexual minority) like you, but I think you're really swell, and if anybody tries to beat you up, I'll help you out and probably get beat up, too.

"There is a cat petting-zoo at the Cool Place.

"There is also a cooperative fabrication shop, where junk metal is transformed into art.

"There's also a time machine."

She finished reading and swung around on her chair to face him. Whenever she read aloud, she blushed. She was blushing now.

"Well?" she asked. Her voice was hopeful.

"I like it." He had to say that. He knew she'd put in the bit about junk-sculpture just for him. "But . . ."

"But what?"

"But is it necessarily cool, or is it just . . . naïve?"

Her eyes grew wide, her lips tight. Dylan knew he'd tweaked her, but he couldn't seem to stop.

"Where's your conflict? You got paradise there, Luce. *Your* idea of paradise. What goes wrong? What threatens the Cool Place?"

"Look," she said. "It's *my* world. I don't *want* anything to go wrong!"

"You know how bored you'd get living in the Cool Place, with nothing to devil things up? No shadows, no monsters, no passion?"

She began to twist a strand of midnight-blue hair around her index finger. The only thing worse was her nail-gnawing. She wore black fingernail polish, and, when she chewed her nails, flecks of it got on her tongue.

"I mean, come on!" he said.

"Make your own damned world, Dylan." Twist, twist, twist. "Call it Angst Alley. Call it Dysfunction Junction. Call it—"

"What's the time machine for?"

She yanked her finger out of the coil of hair and started biting the nail.

"You work," she said, "in 2000. You *live* in 1990. And you see bands

in 1980. I mean, it's obvious, isn't it?"

"What about diseases?"

"There won't be any."

"Not even," he said, "depression?"

"Particularly not depression."

He sighed and shook his head. "Crime?"

"None."

"Parking tickets?"

"Dylan, I wish you'd stop making fun of me."

"You mean you've got this perfect world, and there's even enough on-the-street parking?"

"What," she said, "would you suggest?"

"A world where everything's grey," he said.

"That's what you've got now," she said.

"I know," said Dylan.

When the mountain-man left, the pigeons snuck off, leaving the bread to sog in the falling rain. Dylan leaned forward and picked up the envelope. He leaned back, propped his feet up on the windowsill, and laid the envelope on his lap.

Without looking at it, he felt his way along the envelope's flap and carefully tore it open. He eased his fingertips inside. When he touched the contents, he instantly knew. Opening his eyes was simply confirmation.

Inside lay a long braided strand of midnight-blue hair, tied at both ends with thread of red silk.

"Ah, Luce," he said. "Goddammit."

He pinched the strand of hair between his fingertips and slid it out of the envelope, laid it flat on his palm, and stroked it with his forefinger, staring out the window at the falling grey rain.

"Where are you?" he asked. "Where are you *really*?"

He raised the braid to his mouth and ran it slowly between his lips. He was careful not to touch it to his tongue. He didn't want it to smell of the lithium in his saliva.

A junk-artist Jaques and a PC Pollyanna. They'd set themselves up for failure, trying to love each other. Trying to be with each other. He'd told her so before. He told her again that night.

Accusingly, she recited to him Browning's "My Last Duchess." Sardonicly, he recited back to her Baudelaire's "L'Invitation Au Voyage." They tore apart their bookcases, flinging poetry at each other until the sky lightened and the seagulls began to scream.

"I can't do this anymore," she said, sinking down on the floor, wrapping her arms around her knees, bowing her head.

"Then don't."

"What's *wrong* with wanting something better?" she cried.

"What's wrong with wanting something *real*?"

"The Cool Place—"

"Doesn't exist."

Lucy raised her head and stared at him.

"I'm going to *make* it exist," she said, with a determination that scared him.

"Right."

"I *will*, Dylan. If you haven't heard from me in a year, you'll know. No answer is an answer."

Famous last words.

Dylan remembered the thing from the Bible that his mother used to recite to him. That thing about not letting the sun set on your anger. He'd thought about it nearly every day for the past year, but he'd revised it in his mind. It was now a thing about not letting the sun rise on your anger.

He'd been pretty sure that Lucy hadn't intended to leave forever when she strode out of the studio that morning. She didn't have that much spite in her. He should have known better, when she'd taken her old portable typewriter with her.

He did know better, when he found her key on the windowsill.

He never thought he'd miss her so much. He never realized how she'd balanced him. He got his psychiatrist to up his dose of lithium, and for a while, that kept him steady. But lithium couldn't do everything. It couldn't chew its black fingernails. It couldn't twist its beautiful blue hair. It couldn't recite a poem for every occasion, or aspire to build a world.

It couldn't give him anything better than perpetual grey.

He got up from the chair, not letting go of the envelope or the braid of her hair, and pulled a sheet of paper from her desk.

"Dear Lucy," he wrote. "Got your message. Thank you. If I can pass, I'd like to see your new Place. I think I'm just what you need to devil things up.

"I love you.

"Dylan."

He folded the paper, put it in an envelope, and wrote "The Cool Place" on the front. He added the studio's address in the upper left corner, then struck it out. If he were to make the leap of faith, he couldn't ask for proof.

He leaned out the window and flung the envelope into the wind.

A storm of pigeons fluttered up to meet it. ●



In 1959, Kathleen Ann Goonan and her family moved to Hawaii. The islands were still, though just barely, a territory. "I was of an age to devour legends. Later, when I moved to Honolulu as an adult, those legends awakened and mingled with politics and history." That absorbing interest has evolved into the beautiful story of . . .

KAMEHAMEHA'S BONES

Kathleen Ann Goonan

art: Laurie Harden



"I must have been born under an unlucky star, as I seem to have my life planned out for me in such a way that I cannot alter it."

—Victoria Kaliulani

It was just eight in the morning, but down at Honolulu Harbor, next to the Aloha Tower, eight was hot.

Cen, wearing a neon green bathing suit and zoris, was covered with sweat, and his arms hurt from loading crates of iced squid and mahi from a boat into the back of Lu-Wei's ancient '95 Toyota Forerunner, which was more rust than car. He stopped, wiped his forehead with the back of his hand, and looked around for a Coke machine.

Lu-Wei, a short, fat man who spent most of every afternoon Mah-Jongg gambling in the seedy Chinese park on Nuuanu, said, "Hey, boy, I pay you good you do this work not laze around! My customers pay extra for wild. But not if it ain't fresh."

"Fuck you," Cen muttered, but went back to get a crate of yellowtail, still thirsty. Like hell these were wild, anyway. He could tell farm-grown, even if the customers couldn't.

He turned; stopped short. A young girl stood on the dock next to the boat. She hadn't been there a moment before.

She wore a frilly white cotton dress with a large bow tied at the side of her slim waist. Many fine pleats ran from her high, lacy collar down to her waist. He'd gone shopping with Clai once or twice, and had never seen anything like this, not even in the most expensive department in Samson Brothers.

As he approached, the girl looked at him directly, seriously, with wonderful, enormous brown eyes, as if taking his measure. Her long black hair was held back in a ponytail. It frizzed slightly around her oval, olive-complected face, which was shaded by a parasol held in her right hand. She wore unscuffed black patent leather shoes, which shone in the brilliant sun. Cen blinked. She looked distinctly old-fashioned against the backdrop of a crane unloading satellite dishes bound for Hickam Spacebase.

"Hello," she said. "I've been watching you. You are *alii*, aren't you?"

He laughed with conscious bitterness. "Sure I am. Royal blood, that's right, a real prince. My dad, he was a prince too. A great man." He rubbed his forehead with his hand, as if he could wipe away the web of red and black that suddenly enveloped him.

"You remind me of my Uncle David," she said, and he saw sunlight sparkling on the water once again, and clear blue sky above.

"What you stopping for now, lazy son-of-bitch!" Lu yelled across two docks and rapped the side of the Forerunner with his ivory cane. "Gotta get this stuff to market! Late *already*."

Cen jerked his head back toward Lu-Wei. "Yeah, I'm special. That's why I work for *that* asshole." Then he was ashamed of saying asshole in front of this weird girl. He bent and picked up the yellowtail, walked over, and shoved the flat into the Runner.

He wiped his fishy hands on his trunks and turned to wave at the girl before leaving.

But she was gone.

He looked down at the fish he would soon have to gut. Shimmering red blood would swirl down the drain beneath his spray; one fish eye would stare at him as he yanked out its stomach. He swallowed bile and climbed into the driver's seat.

As far as Cen knew, his dad had never looked for him.

Cen had been terrified, at first, of being found. But after four years, he knew he wouldn't turn up on the side of a milk carton, or be one of the "Missing" holos the police left to haunt certain street corners every day.

He lived in a flophouse room on Hotel Street. Whores had most of the rooms, and they looked out for him.

He'd taken a few things with him the night he left, after his parents had had a bad fight. One thing was a photograph of his great-grandfather.

The massive dark man stood erect. A few palm trees cast shadows across the sand where he stood. He was naked, but his tattoos—delicate, tiny geometric patterns which didn't go far above his hips—gave him a clothed look.

Cen took the picture to an old-fashioned tattoo artist on Queen Street. For months, once a week, he gritted his teeth in that tiny hot room that smelled of whisky, until it was complete. Somehow he was able to forget a little more with each stab of the needle. When it was finished, his nightmares would be gone. He would be just himself. Completely new. That was the deal, and that was how he spent his first money, the year he turned eleven.

The deal didn't quite work out. But he never regretted it.

Until now, when he was fifteen.

He was pretty sure that this girl wasn't the type who liked tattoos.

A week later, he was standing at the window of a Thai carry-out, pouring sweet condensed milk into his iced coffee.

"Hey, that's enough, you greedy pig!" the woman told him, and snatched the can from his hand. She slammed the window shut.

Cen smelled the strong sweet scent of ginger, and turned.

"People are very rude here," the girl said, but smiled. Her eyes were mischievous. The sun was directly behind her head and her face was dark, but the wisps of hair which stood out around her face were lit like a nimbus.

"Do you want some?" he asked.

She took it and drank. "Good," she said, and drank more.

Cen wished he hadn't been so generous.

"Don't worry," she said, as if she knew what he was thinking, and handed it back. "Do you want to go for a walk?"

What does she want? "Sure."

He started to walk toward the pineapple plant, with its enormous ugly metal pineapple towering above it, where the squalor of the streets reminded him of the punk virtuals down at the arcade, scumworlds where you had to keep your wits about you to keep from getting offed. A few Filipino boys had a cockfight every afternoon in the Mongoose's packed-dirt backyard, and he had a few hundred yen to blow.

"No," she said. "This way."

He shrugged. He'd probably just lose his money anyway. "Okay." They started to walk toward Diamond Head instead.

She was wearing that same white dress. You'd think that she'd be hot, but she looked as cool as the white clouds which hid the mountaintops. "It's so strange here," she said.

"It is?"

"I'm getting used to it."

In a block, they passed Huang Po's shop—Acupuncture/Fortunes Told/Money Loaned. Huang, who always boasted that he trafficked with certain Buddhist deities, was sitting out under the awning, fanning himself.

When he saw them, he turned white and stood suddenly, knocking over his chair. Before he ran inside, Cen saw a look of sheer terror in his eyes. The door slammed shut.

Cen stopped and looked at her. She returned his gaze with the same intense, liquid, intelligent expression that he remembered from the first time they had met.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"My name is Kaiulani."

"Where do you live?"

"My parents have a big house down at Waikiki. They would be very angry if they knew that I was coming over to the harbor." She giggled. "They want to keep me all locked up. Safe. But I need to know what my people are like."

"Your people."

Serenity and composure blazed from her, yet she answered a bit impatiently, "Yes. Queen Liliuokalani is my aunt. After her, I'm next in line." She raised her chin and stared at him.

"What are you *talking* about?"

"I guess you don't believe me."

"Believe *what*?"

"That I'm going to be the next ruler of Hawaii."

A nut. But a rich nut, obviously. She was very beautiful, frail, fine-boned. His exact height. He felt sorry for her. She wasn't a tourist. She looked Hawaiian, which was about as rare as the o-o bird. And yet—

"Your parents are right," he said. "You shouldn't be over on this side of town. Let me walk you home."

She frowned. "I can get home by myself, thank you," she said. "It's almost time for tea, anyway, and they become upset if I miss it."

Tea? He was so dumbfounded by the whole performance that he let

her walk away. By the time he thought to follow her, she had turned the corner, and when he rushed around Huang Po's and looked down King Street, it was empty of people, as it often was this time of afternoon.

The street vibrated with her absence.

His breath came short with terror. "Don't leave me!" he said, gazing at the old buildings, suddenly afraid that they might vanish too and leave him alone in a dark frightening void with flashes of red, the nebulous place of his recurring nightmares, where nothing was real—but that was all he had and all he ever would have.

Score some *pakalolo*, he told himself. Forget about this girl. Be stoned all night—you got to work anyway.

His side job right now was washing the greasy dishes of rich tourists who stuffed themselves on fish covered with macadamia nuts, and macadamia nut pie, and washed it down with about ten Blue Hawaiis. He wished he could afford to leave his job at the fish market. It physically sickened him; at least once a month, he rushed from the flopping fish and rivers of blood to puke in the bathroom, but Lu-Wei paid surprisingly well, valuing his dependability, and Cen had vague dreams of going to school. Or something.

Stoned, he could dream of it being winter, when the surf would be big over at Makaha. Life was real then. Lots of dumb tourists came out there and locked their cameras and wallets in the trunks of their cars, thinking that that would keep their stuff from being stolen. Cen could break into a trunk and be gone with the goods in about ten seconds flat. Yeah, sure—if he tried, maybe even a street kid like him could do something besides clean fish and steal. Someday.

But right now, maybe the Mongoose could help him out. He usually had a little extra.

"Have you ever read Robert Louis Stevenson?" Kaiulani asked one day as they sat in the park. Cen had a joint in his hand; the cops didn't care because this was a bum park. He'd tried to steer Kaiulani to one of the nice parks like the Banyan Tree Park with the big fountain midtown, but she insisted that she wanted to see how her people lived.

"Who's that?" He didn't want to tell her that he didn't read too much. Reading reminded him of his mom.

Kaiulani smiled. Cen loved to see her smile. Her eyes were the kindest he'd ever seen. "He's my friend. He reads with me—Shakespeare and Plato, and he's even teaching me Latin. He's a *haku mele*." A poet. She looked grave again. "You have to know a lot to be a ruler. You have to know just about everything there is to know. Especially you have to know a lot about politics and the world and everything. And foreign languages—French is my favorite. I hate German, don't you?"

He liked this crazy girl. "The only foreign language I know is English," he said.

"You mean that Hawaiian is your native tongue."

My native tongue. "Yeah." Sometimes, like whenever he went up into

the Waianai Mountains, or rode Jae's dirt bike around Kaena Point, where it was so wild, or when he was out on his board, he *did* think in Hawaiian. "How did you know?"

"I told you," she said. "I can tell you're *alii*."

"That's crazy," he said.

Then he realized: it was not.

His mother had taught him to recite his genealogy back to the days of the ancient chiefs, but he hadn't even remembered that until just now. Funny what you could forget. If you tried. It had mattered to her. But it was bullshit. It wasn't important. Not *these* days, when they were trying to build a Moon colony, and the shuttle roared in every Wednesday from the space station.

But what could a little pretending hurt? She made him *happy*. Shouldn't that be enough?

"Yeah," he said, "and I know where Kamehameha's bones are."

He thought that she would say, "*Sure* you do."

Instead, she jumped up from the grass and stood in front of him. Her face had a wild look.

"Don't ever, *ever*, tell anybody!" she said, and kissed him quickly, full on the lips.

Then she turned, and her long white dress spun out like a ginger blossom. She ran down the street, her patent leather shoes scuffing with a chu-chu-chu sound, while he felt ashamed of not knowing who this Stevenson guy was.

And what was all that about Kamehameha's bones? It had just popped out of his mouth. Weird things happened when that girl was around.

He did dream about bones sometimes: yellow and pitted. Scary. Giving off the awful energy of death. He feared those dreams most of all. Sometimes he felt that dark power struggling to come into his world, to leak through the bright buildings of modern-day Honolulu and sweep him into everlasting night.

Anyway, Kamehameha had died over two hundred years ago. He was the first king to unite the Hawaiian Islands. Nobody knew where his bones were. They were hidden by *kahunas*—priests—as soon as he died. But she was right: bones were sacred to Hawaiians. They had much *mana*, much power. If your enemies got hold of them, your bones became fishhooks. It was the ultimate insult.

He didn't know why he dreamed about them. He figured he'd seen them on TV when he was little, or something, and they made a big impression. He could even *hear* them, in his dreams. Smooth, dark, long-fingered hands rolled them into an old piece of tapa cloth, and they made dry, distant sounds as they clanked together and went back into darkness.

The genealogy chant that his mother had taught him came back to Cen whole one night, after he woke from a nightmare, in a rush of bright, linked words. In the torrent of names, he found *hers*: Kaiulani. The

last Princess of Hawaii. Her real name was Victoria Kawekiu Lunalilo Kalaninuiāhīlāpalāpapa Kaiulani. Her claim to the throne was through her mother, Princess Likelike.

The next night he went to the library. He couldn't hang around there during the day. Somebody might figure out that he wasn't in school.

The library, with its open courtyard, reminded him so much of his mother that he almost left. *Fuck you!* he thought at the people he thought were staring at him as he rubbed tears from his face.

A brief shower cooled the courtyard, pattering on the enormous palms a few feet from the table he'd chosen, as he hesitated before opening the faded pictorial of old Hawaii.

In the index, he found her name. Trembling, he turned dry pages until he came to the right one.

It was eerie how much the same she looked.

The photograph, an old black and white one, showed her standing on the lawn of a mansion. Aina hau, the mansion, was built by her father, Archibald Cleghorn, at Waikiki, and everyone ridiculed him for building so far from town, in the middle of a swamp. The tops of a few palm trees were visible behind the house, and the front yard was deeply shaded by a massive banyan and lots of mimosas. That would be just about right; she reminded him of those odd pink flowers, fans of soft, bright pink spines which floated to earth when the trade winds blew and filled the air with sweetness.

Two peacocks strutted in front of her, and she was bending toward one, laughing, her long black hair loose around her face as she directly faced the camera.

Robert Louis Stevenson, King David Kalakaua, and Princess Kaiulani, the caption read.

He got the feeling that, in the picture, it was almost time for tea.

He leafed through the book. He found one other picture of Princess Kaiulani. She was a child, standing next to her Aunt, Queen Lilioukalanī, on the steps of Iolani Palace. She was watching the coronation of her uncle, King David Kalakaua, and his wife, Queen Kapiolani. It was 1882. Her face, even at seven, was grave and certain.

That was all. But it was *her*. Beyond a doubt.

How?

She was a ghost. He'd more than half suspected it already, but, nevertheless, he shivered. She was a ghost—he could *touch* her, but still, somehow, she was a ghost. She had died more than a hundred years ago. He shivered again.

During the next few weeks, he studied Kaiulani, burning for information. When he slept, he dreamed of her: always in a white dress, walking the footpaths of old Hawaii, spinning him deeper and deeper into the ancient ways of his people. Waking, he realized that he knew more about his people than *she* did; from birth she had been protected, Europeanized,

as befitted a future monarch. Even her name, Kaiulani, meant "the royal sacred one."

He found letters in which she wrote to her Papa about her European studies; he read the books she mentioned and began to wish he wasn't tied to just books. There were touchscreens and virtuals which could only be accessed by a library key. He hadn't applied for one; he was illegal.

He studied Hawaiian ghosts, too. Kaiulani had never put in an appearance as one in the legends, but after all, she had died after the time of Old Hawaii, when they were so prevalent in the lives of the people. Perhaps, he reasoned, she was a *new* one. They seemed to have plenty of powers. Traveling through time was only one of them. They gave advice, and warnings. They could envelop people in dreams, and thus influence them. They could transport anyone they pleased from place to place as easily as the police moved their "missing" holos around. Pele the volcano goddess was the most famous, but there were hundreds.

And, most important to him, they seemed to be strongly associated with *place*. As if they were manifested by the *land*, encountered by people who happened to walk the same path, perhaps fifty years after the last spotting, and the ghost would still be there, ageless.

Stevenson had written a poem for her. When she was thirteen, she was sent to Europe to become educated as befitted a future queen of a kingdom, and this was his going-away present.

*Forth from her land to mine she goes,
The island maid, the island rose,
Light of heart and bright of face,
The daughter of a double race.*

*Her islands here in southern sun
Shall mourn their Kaiulani gone,
And I, in her dear banyan's shade,
Look vainly for my little maid.*

*But our Scots islands far away
Shall glitter with unwonted day,
And cast for once their tempest by
To smile in Kaiulani's eye.*

Pretty hokey stuff, as far as Cen was concerned. He could probably do better himself.

"Why don't you want me to tell anyone where Kamehameha's bones are?" Cen asked Kaiulani.

They were sitting in a grove of mango trees, just back from the beach at Ala Moana. She had brought it up again, and he decided to play along.

Kaiulani laughed, picked up a ripe mango, and threw it right at him.

It splattered against his arm, its overripe tang exploding in his nose. She giggled and whirled and ran, hoisting her long white dress.

Cen was surprised at how fast she could dart across the broad green lawn, which was splotted by the midday shadows of coconut palms.

Still, he got close enough in a minute to catch hold of her sash. It ripped from her dress, and she turned, eyes blazing.

"You don't do that to a *princess!*" she said, and slapped him.

His cheek stung. Angry, he said, "Just tell me about the bones, then, *Princess Victoria Kaiulani.*" He had never said her name before, not since the day she'd told him, and his voice shook now.

She stared at him. "You know."

"I know," he said.

"Sit," she said.

They sat together and watched surf breaking out on the reef, and the brilliant green shallows inside it.

"My governess' father died looking for the bones," she said. "He went out on a horse and the horse slipped off the mountain and he died. It's *kapu*. Very bad luck." She laughed. "I was cursed, by the power of the bones, the old man said." She laughed again, her voice light and unconcerned. "Silly superstition!" He had to smile at the idea of a *ghost* denouncing superstition.

She was quiet for a moment and then said, "But still, *I* need to see them. Me, and no one else."

"Why?" he asked, in a whisper.

She stood up and turned to look out at the ocean. A narrow strip of it was visible through the trees, with its distant edge of white. Green until it turned deep blue, suddenly, at the reef line.

"Because *I* am to rule this land," she said.

If anyone else had uttered these words so seriously, he would have laughed in derision. But she brought dignity to everything she said. It was easy, very easy, to believe her.

He felt his whole mind and being spin, then expand, into *her* reality, *her* life. So much more bright than his own. The red and black heaviness always pressing upon him dropped as he listened to her and watched her beautiful, earnest face. He realized that he had to help her in any way he possibly could. Nothing was more important than her dream of justice for Hawaiians. All around he saw his disenfranchised brothers and sisters, many of them filled with deep, debilitating anger at the descendants of those who had taken their land and their country. Still unwilling to adapt, after all these years, to a life they saw as less holy and less pure than what had been stolen from them.

She stared out at the waves breaking on the reef. "They're talking about sending me to Europe for my education," she said, and with those words desolation filled him. What would that mean for *him*?

He had been seeing her for several months now. Not many times. But each time, he was drawn further into her life, her being, her loveliness, and her certainty. Everything about her was the opposite of himself. He

lived to see her. He didn't dare press her about anything. He had stopped caring *why* he could see her, *how* she could be here. It only mattered that he *could*.

And now she was leaving.

Why was he surprised? That was what had really happened, according to the books he had read. In 1888, she took a boat to San Francisco, crossed the country to New York, then sailed to England.

"I don't really want to go so far away," she said, "but it's for the good of my people. Yet, to *help* my people, I need to know everything *about* them. Their beliefs. *My* life is very civilized. I sit in the great room in the evenings, listening to queens and kings from my own and other countries speak. The windows are always open and the breeze blows in from off the sea and rattles the banana trees. All the foreign ambassadors are friends with my father. They come and drink gin and play cards. I'm very quiet so that they don't chase me away. It seems that everyone wants Hawaii—the British, the Americans, even the Japanese. But we need it for *ourselves*. After all, it is ours."

She turned to look at Cen. "You are *alii*, like me. If you know where the bones are, you must show me. It's not only the things in Europe I need to learn. My old nurse said that the bones give life to the land. Perhaps if I saw them, I would understand my land better."

Cen felt very cold. "I haven't seen any bones," he said. Why had he ever said such a ridiculous thing?

"I don't believe that," she said, looking straight at him. "I don't believe that you would lie to me."

You don't know much about me then, he thought.

"If you're really a ghost," he said, "why can I see you? Why can I *touch* you?"

She reached over and brushed his arm with two fingers. "Because you are special. Maybe that's the reason *I* can see you."

What is it like to be dead? he wanted to ask, but was afraid.

His study of her became frenzied. The librarians got to know him, and he learned to ignore their knowing smiles as he requested more and more archival information about Kaiulani.

The worst part was that she had died so young.

It struck him to the heart to turn to the last few pages of her biography, which he had by now done many times. While she was in Europe attending expensive schools, all sorts of political shenanigans went on. Hawaii was up for grabs, too small to defend herself against greedy *haole* business interests. Almost all the land was finagled from the Hawaiians. Kaiulani finally went to Washington herself, when she was eighteen, and met with Grover Cleveland and his wife in a last-ditch effort to keep Hawaii from being annexed by the United States. A "Provisional Government" composed of rich American businessman had ousted Kaiulani's aunt, Queen Liliuokalani, but as long as Cleveland was President,

Hawaii remained a kingdom. In January 1895, there was a small rebel uprising which was quashed by American troops.

And once Cleveland was out of the White House, the Annexationists had their way. On August 12, 1898, Hawaii ceased to be a sovereign country. In January 1899, Kaiulani, while staying at the Parker Ranch on the Big Island, went for a horseback ride with friends. Instead of putting on her raincoat during a sudden cold storm, she said, "What have I got to live for?" She loosed her hair, and galloped off into the tempest. She caught a cold, worsened, and within weeks was dead. She was twenty-three years old. There was talk of a *kahuna's* curse.

Her last years were filled with proud heartbreak and the desolation of knowing that she was not to fulfill her purpose in life. No wonder she walked the earth rather than resting in it.

Cen felt weak when he closed the book. Kaiulani was so young and beautiful, so full of life and hope. How could this terrible thing, this untimely death, have happened? It had been foretold, as the birth of Kamehameha had been foretold: the *kahunas* had decided before he was born that *he* would be the one to unite the islands. The Hawaiians seemed to have a fascination with death. Apparently, at the time, people thought that Kaiulani had been prayed to death, like her mother before her. Her mother had been only thirty-six when she died, after mysteriously taking to her bed. She had not only foreseen her *own* death, but had predicted all the major events in *Kaiulani's* life: that she would live most of it far away, that she would never marry, and that she would never be queen. What was this terrible power of *vision* that Hawaiians had?

He walked out of the library and into the night, knees shaking.

You fool, he told himself. She's a ghost, and there's no such thing as ghosts. He walked through narrow streets to his small room, and lay there watching the curtains puff in and out in the night trades, staving off sleep until he was exhausted enough that nightmares could not surface. He was afraid of dreaming Kaiulani's death.

Still, day after day, he was bursting to tell her how much he knew, the poems he'd memorized, like "I Want To Go Down To The Sea Again." When he stacked fish on the ice in Lu-Wei's stand in the Chinese Market, he went over a new poem every few days. When he ran the guts out of a mahi with his thumb, while he wrapped it in paper, took the money, and said Thank you ma'am to Miss Jenny Wang with her cute, narrow eyes, he was thinking, *And the stars to steer her by*. Even gutting fish while they were still alive—which his customers, serious eaters of fish, preferred—didn't seem to bother him so much anymore. *She* was learning Shakespeare, so he tried *Richard III*, reading slowly, pretending he was speaking out loud to get the sense of it, with a dictionary next to him, and wondered how she stood it. Nasty stuff, nasty man.

Finally, he got tired of waiting. One afternoon he hopped on the bus on King Street and went downtown. Past Ala Moana Park, with the peninsula made of garbage, a good place to stalk careless people who hid their wallets under their towels and swam out to the reef. Past Ala

Moana shopping center, a great place to pick pockets. Past the Ala Wai yacht club—nothing but hard work there, skinny captains wanting you to rub their teak decks with 000 steel wool for a couple of weeks while they drank expensive whisky below.

The sky was bright blue, as usual, full of fluffy white clouds snagged by the peaks of the steep green mountains just inland. He smelled smog and exhaust, and, when he got off the bus across from the beach, coconut oil.

The Princess Kaiulani Hotel was in the middle of Waikiki.

Cen stood on the site of her childhood home that her father had tried to turn into a park; he was thwarted by his wife's heirs, who presumably now drew money from the hotel.

While horns blared and tourists jostled him, he yearned for the things he had seen in the books: a green, still lawn, a botanical paradise, peacocks, and Chinese ginger blossoms. Victoria Kawekiu Lunalilo Kalani-nuiāhilapalapapa Kaiulani. The girl in the long white dress who now lived in his dreams. This was her sacred ground, filled with her life, her thought, her being.

He stepped forward, intending to enter the lobby.

But instead, it was suddenly all new and clear and bright. He saw people around him, clearly Hawaiians, standing proudly, speaking with conviction, though he couldn't quite catch the words. Two men in old-fashioned suits stood to his right, on the lawn, with glasses in their hands.

Then Kaiulani ran up to him. "I'm so happy you came! This is my last day here."

"Why?" He felt a rush of panic.

"I'm going to England, to go to school! I'm sailing to San Francisco on the *Umatillo*."

He knew. Once in England, she would live in Northamptonshire, in a place called Harrowden Hall.

"Oh, I'm so excited!" She whirled around, hugging herself. "There's so much to learn! So much to know!"

What did *he* know? Stinking fish and a few poems.

"You're a *ghost*," he whispered, but she didn't seem to hear. He looked up, and the sun blazed in the clear sky.

It was very quiet. Only the sound of surf, and the cries of peacocks now and then. The skyscrapers shimmered, as if trying to come back into existence, then vanished. Yet he was not afraid. A swamp of taro lay between him and the sea, and to his right were a few blocks of frame houses.

His chest tightened, and he gasped a few times. He felt close to tears from happiness and pain.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

A *haole* waiter walked up to them. He was dressed in a white jacket, wore white gloves, and held a round tray above his head.

"Drink, sir?"

"The ginger beer is good," said Kaiulani, and again he saw that glimmer of mischief in her eyes.

"I'll try one of those," he said. "Thank you," some long-lost part of himself thought to add.

He and Kaiulani sipped ginger beer. "This is really special," she said. "The old people have a word for it."

"For what?" They sat on wrought iron chairs. Her breasts were very apparent now, beneath her white, high-collared dress, and she wore a straw hat with a broad brim and a sash tied in a large bow beneath her left ear.

"For us being able to see each other."

"Oh." He was silent for a moment, then asked, "What's the word?"

"*Uhane maka*," she whispered, leaning close for an instant. "Friends of the soul."

"Kaiulani," he said abruptly, shaken, "don't go to Europe."

She looked away. "I'll miss you, of course. But I *have* to go. I have to learn history, and languages, and mathematics, and literature. I have to know as much as I possibly can in order to rule well."

He couldn't bear to tell her what would happen to her. It wouldn't be right. "No," was all he could say, as fervently as possible. "No, please. It's very important that you stay." I will miss you too, he wanted to say, but could not, because he would have to say, I will miss you forever, because you are going to die.

A bearded man wearing a top hat and tails waved at her from across the garden. She jumped up.

"I have to go now," she said, and lightly kissed him before she ran off.

"No!" he shouted, jumping up from his chair.

Even though he *knew* she would go. Because she *did*. She already *had*. She went to Europe, came back, and died. She's dead already, he told himself, standing numbly in the bright, dead garden. She's been gone for over a hundred years. Her bones have been in the earth since before you were *born*.

But to him, Kaiulani was a symbol of all that had gone wrong with Hawaii, the very reason why the United States had been able to annex Hawaii—because of secret deals between some Hawaiian Royals and American businessmen. Backroom manipulation of a trusting people with a completely different mindset from the conquerors. Backroom manipulation of *Kaiulani*: a princess, and a pawn.

Why did they have to make her be a princess? Why did they set her up this way, to fail? It was terribly cruel. *They* killed her. *They* were murderers.

Blindly, Cen turned and fled from the garden, feeling his own world, his own time, close around him again. He knew, as he ran, with tears streaming down his face, that she really *would* be gone, whatever she was.

It was more than he could bear.

* * *

More heartsick than ever, he started hanging around the virtual booths in the library. He *had* to see her again. In the catalog it said that the Bishop Museum had created a single virtual of her. It ran for three minutes.

He hung around the booths for weeks, carefully watching how it was done. There was a virtual arcade in Waikiki where he'd dropped too many yen. He'd been there so much that he could almost tell what virtual somebody was in just by their dance. But this was more complex: the virtuals were hypertexted, and even getting into the system required some computer expertise. He'd used computers in preschool, sure. What was that—ten years ago? Things had changed.

One night, while he was reading a history of Europe and glancing longingly, every few minutes, at an empty virtual booth, he jumped at a tap on his shoulder.

He turned and found himself looking into strange gray eyes.

The man's hair was short, light brown with lots of gray.

"I've been watching you," he said.

Shit. Cen tensed. I'm not doing anything wrong, he told his body, but years of sneaking and stealing bound his muscles. His heart was beating fast.

"You know, it's not hard to learn how to use the virtuals," the man said.

"Who are you?" asked Cen, upset that he sounded so tough and belligerent.

The man smiled. "I'm Ross Benet. I'm a mathematics professor at UH, but I come over here pretty often. It's a good place to think. You're here a lot too, I notice."

Cen didn't like his searching look. "So?"

"So, I'm impressed. Not many kids are as interested in learning as you."

Not many kids have an *uhane maka*.

"You're really missing out on things without the virtuals, though. I'd like to teach you how to use them."

Cen didn't trust the guy, but what the hell. He wanted to know how to hype. He let the guy lead him over to a booth, and sat in the extra chair he pulled up. Ross slid in his key, a flat plastic card with a magnetic strip, watched as the screen told him that it was accepted, then returned it to his shirt pocket.

"Helmet," Ross said. "Gloves."

Yeah, and I'm four years old. Cen put them on.

"Judging by your reading material, you're interested in Hawaiiiana." Nosy old coot.

Cen forgave him in the first rush of virtuals.

A month later, Cen was in Ross' living room, shouting at him. "Find yourself another whore!" he yelled. He threw his beer across the room; it smashed against a black and white photograph on Ross' impeccably

white wall. Glass shattered; beer flamed down the wall; it had arced from the bottle's mouth while in transit, and darkened a chair covered in a delicate shade of lime-green silk.

"Cen, my dear," Ross began. He stood in the doorway to the hall which led from the living room to the bedrooms. Outside, the night traffic of H-4 in downtown Honolulu a few blocks away was like the sound of surf; up here, on the lower flank of the Manoa Valley, crickets hummed, and the breeze rattled the blinds.

"I'm not your *dear!*" Cen shouted. A part of him stood apart, amazed at his fury. He wondered if this was how his father used to feel.

"You knew, of course," said Ross, his face settling in lines of ironic amusement. He went to the kitchen and came back with a towel, began to wipe down the wall.

"I'm sorry," Ross continued. "You *are* very attractive, and I thought—"

"You thought that since I live on Hotel Street, that *that's* how I made my money. I know. You must have followed me home one night and figured it out, right? Or maybe tattoos turn you on?"

Ross stood and turned around. "I mean it," he said. "Forgive me. You are a very gifted boy—"

"Yeah," Cen said bitterly. "I'm *gifted* all right."

Ross sat in the green silk chair and held the wet towel in both hands, twisted it into a knot. "Look," he said. "I don't need you for sex, Cen, even though you *are* attractive to me, in many different ways. In fact, I have a steady lover who'd be pretty pissed off if he knew about this. But it's true that you're very bright. I want you to have the opportunity to learn. To get ahead. To become educated."

Cen stood in the living room, hands on his hips. You scum. He continued to stare at the man, and was impressed that his eyes held no hint of shame, though apology was there. Cen had lived on the streets for a long time. Nothing was a hundred percent right. But he knew when to take advantage of a situation. He had to go to school because Kaiulani had. She couldn't know more than him! In spite of what had just happened, he felt that there was something straight about this weird man and this weird chance, and that he couldn't just run from it. "Just as long as you know," he said, trying to shake the memory of being pulled toward Ross, and that sudden, searching kiss.

Ross shook his head. "I guess I know."

"It's not that I think it's wrong. I'm just not interested. I don't think I'll change my mind."

Ross said nothing, but his smile was rueful.

A half an hour later, as Cen walked downhill through the darkened campus, he found himself longing for Kaiulani again.

When he was with her, her presence wrapped him in joy. Sometimes he wished he had imagined her. But he knew that she was very real indeed.

"Kai," he whispered, as he stood in front of a flood of traffic, waiting

for the light to change, "it's not fair, you know. I can't see *you* when I want to."

Sometimes when he thought of her, it seemed that he ought to be able to make time move, to flow like a liquid, like the rush of sparkling turquoise water in reefpools, ebbing and flowing. Kaiulani was like the little islands he kayaked to sometimes with jugs of water and some rice rolls, islands he couldn't see when he started out, ones he could only feel, guess at, and then they appeared, small dark lines on the horizon, moving toward him as she had moved toward him. He never missed. He never used a map. She appeared in his life like that. Just *there*, all at once, in the trackless ocean of time.

He slept beneath a hibiscus bush on her heavily landscaped grounds that night, and, when he woke, he knew that *she* couldn't see *him* whenever she wanted to, either. Otherwise she would come to him. She would. Of *course* she would.

But she didn't.

And after a while, as he waited futilely for her to come, the books in Ross's library caught like wildfire in his mind.

First: Gamow, Bohr, Godel. On through Einstein's explanation of relativity for lay people, and then through all the old popular books about Chaos Theory, and then through everything Steven Hawking ever wrote or said. And beyond.

He didn't understand them at all, of course. But they fractured his already fragile ideas about the nature of time and space, and reaffirmed his conviction that his meetings with his princess had somehow been real, and not hallucinations brought on by *pacalolo* and need.

By the time he was seventeen, he didn't remember when he had first begun to wonder whether Kaiulani might be a manifestation of some sort of time displacement. He only knew that there seemed to be no spells, no frame of mind, no stance of being which would call her back to him. Angry and hurt and lonely, he just kept on reading, studying, until all that energy was used; transformed.

And in the service of that overwhelming passion, he had, almost without realizing it, absorbed years of college mathematics before he'd even graduated from high school.

Ross had been a kind mentor, never pressuring him for sex after the first attempt, making him into the son that he would never have. Cen still felt cut off from himself, but he accepted it now. He was incomplete, always had been, always would be. That would never change. But somehow it seemed to help him to work for the radical Homeland Movement, which was now gaining political momentum. They claimed that part of the land beneath the new Hickam Spacebase belonged to Hawaiians. They wanted it back.

"You can't continue to speak at these rallies—these *riots*," Ross shouted. "You'll lose your scholarship!" He rattled the newspaper in

Cen's face, the one with the big picture on the front that said, "NATIVE REVOLT."

"Fuck the scholarship," said Cen.

Ross looked hurt. "After all the work we've done. . . ."

Cen had to admit that it was true. Not only had Ross tutored him toward his HS equivalency test, but he'd relentlessly pushed the scholarship committee on his behalf. He looked out the window of Ross' house, through the mango trees and across the lawn patched with rotting yellow fruit, and saw the same blue Pacific upon which Kaiulani had gazed for her first fourteen years.

Cen was eighteen now. Yes, he was bright. So they said. Much to his surprise.

He'd also gathered all the passion and aching loneliness he'd felt without his *uhane maka*, and put it into the Homeland movement.

"You don't understand," he told Ross.

"That's right, I don't." Ross' hair was almost entirely gray now; his latest lover, a Korean astronomer, had left him rather abruptly. As usual, Cen had been faced with putting the pieces back together, with soothing Ross, making him tea, forcing him to take the skim over to Turtle Bay, drink some Blue Hawaiis, and take in a holo show so they could both laugh at its absurdity.

"If it wasn't for you," he said to Ross, "I'd be just like them. Living on welfare—"

"Right," snorted Ross. "I've never seen such a capitalist."

"Well," said Cen, "I'd probably have been in and out of jail several times by now. I'm just trying to give back, help them with their awareness of the legality of their situation. You know, old Hili actually won his suit against Mariott over on the Big Island. That land was *his*, and they had to pay him for it. Through the nose."

"All right. But it's more mystical for you. You're obsessed with it. You're obsessed with this princess of yours. You have some sort of crazy dream about the past—"

"That's right!" shouted Cen. He stalked out and slammed the door behind him. Ross should know better than to say anything about Kaiulani. He'd been a young fool even to tell Ross anything about her in the first place. He knew better now.

Ross bailed him out of jail about three A.M. "Shall we go to the E.R. and see about that gash on your head?" he asked. "I saw it all on TV. Great stuff. I must say, you're none too subtle when you get a microphone in your hand."

Cen had washed the caked blood off. "No," he said. "I'm pretty tired. I just want to go home."

The next day, he got up late. He walked across town and climbed the twisty streets which laced the flank of Punchbowl Crater.

He entered the cemetery, with its rows of American graves, and knew that beneath them were the lava rocks of scattered *heiaus*, the sacred

platforms where *kahunas* had killed people to please the gods. The ground was riddled with bones.

Bones.

He remembered what Kaiulani had said about Kamehameha's bones, and smiled. What a serious girl she had been! He shivered, and something dark ran through him, thinking about bones. He turned his thoughts instead to her, she who was so very bright.

He realized that he was no closer to figuring out why he could see her, why she'd come to him, than he had ever been. He seemed to butt up against mental barriers whichever way he turned. It was a problem too big for his mind. His only hope was to study the limits of time and space, wherever those were—in astronomy, mathematics, physics, cosmology. But if *place* had anything to do with it, then there was a simple explanation for why he had not seen her in years. She was in school, in Europe. She was in Berlin, being proposed to by a rich German Count, and turning him down because she didn't love him. She was in the South of France, "flirting," as she liked to say in her letters—"better to have my fling now than later!"

Looking down the white stepping-stone rows of rectangular markers set flat in the ground, Cen felt the energy which gave the site its real name, Hill-Of-Sacrifice. The gods had to be appeased, the gods of the moment, whether they were the gods who lent fury to Kiluea in fountains of flaming lava or the gods who whipped the entire world to fury and war and had claimed these rows of bodies as their snack, their obviation, their very proof of existence. He had lately been studying history. It made him very sad.

He gazed over the rim, down the steep brambled hillside, past the Spacebase at Hickam. At the end of vision, he could just see Kaena Point, a gray blur on the horizon. It was hallowed ground, the point from which souls departed for whatever lay beyond this life. The blue Pacific ceaselessly caressed the beaches at Ewa, Nanakuli, Makaha.

Cen sighed, and hiked down the road, smelling ginger and garlic as someone prepared dinner in one of the tiny frame shacks which snuggled together on the steep hillside, inhabited by Asians who couldn't speak English. He wished there were no gods, but knew that there always would be, however they might disguise themselves. They may have found more graceful forms in other cultures, but Cen thought that maybe the Polynesian expression of them—with their horrific grimaces and their gaping maws lined with dog teeth—was in the end pretty honest after all. Give them all they want, stuff food into their mouths, keep them off your back.

As for him, he already had a goddess.

During his first year at UH, Ross died in a stupid wavesporting accident when his suit malfunctioned. Cen transferred to American University in Washington, D.C. They had what he wanted. One of the best programs in theoretical physics in the country.

And besides, he remembered—how could he forget?—that Kaiulani had paid that city a brief visit many years ago.

If the program hadn't been so good, he would have thought himself an idiot.

After all, didn't it *snow* in Washington?

Cen's head was bent over his handheld, and he alternated bursts of furious keytapping with gazing out at the street. He had started late this morning after an argument with his roommate and lover, Sandra. She was pretty smart. Maybe that was why she was always in such a bad mood. It was as good a reason as any, he thought. They had fought like cats and dogs ever since they met, a year before. Cen wondered why one of them didn't leave, when he wondered about it at all. Mostly, he was busy working on his dissertation.

Rain streamed down the window of the M Street cafe he had chosen. Washington, D.C. was pretty cold for a Hawaiian on a scholarship. The scholarship covered his tuition, but didn't leave much for things like a warm coat or regular meals. Sometimes he taught, but not this semester. He rarely noticed hunger, anyway. Cold, now—*that* was another thing.

He sealed his vest in response to the wave of cold air which eddied back into his corner as someone came inside; he glanced up briefly, annoyed.

The woman who had just entered had her back to him, and was folding a bright yellow umbrella decorated with green and red parrots. She gave it a brief shake, then stuck it in the white plastic tub with the rest of the umbrellas.

She had attempted to gather her dark brown kinky hair into a long braid, but much had escaped into a wild halo. Her lime-green canvas raincoat was highly tailored, so he could see even with it on that she was exquisitely slim. The long white dress, even with its ruffle at the bottom, even though she wore boots which probably required a buttoner to close the row of about a hundred tiny buttons, did not seem out of place in Georgetown.

Her face, when she turned and looked at him across the crowded cafe, was very dear. And, when she sat across from him, her smile was decidedly impish.

"Bonjour," she said. And then, more softly, "Aloha."

Cen lifted his cup, and the coffee trembled in the thick white cup. He set it down, and coffee splashed onto the table.

"Well," she said, "Aren't you even going to say hi?" She reached over, touched the hand holding the cup.

"Aloha," he said, and all his homesickness welled up in him at once. What was he doing in this cold Eastern city?

Trying to find *her*, of course, and here she was. His heart was so full that he doubted that he could speak if he tried.

"Did you know that I was exiled?" she asked. "The Queen told me that it was better if I didn't come home. That it would only confuse things for

the Royalists and endanger the Republic and our Constitution. But while I'm here, I'm doing all that's possible to prevent annexation. May I have some of that coffee if you're not going to drink it?"

"Yes," he was finally able to make his voice work. "You lived in London, Scotland, Paris, Germany. . . ."

"I'm staying at the Arlington Hotel, to plead for my cause, for the cause of the throne and for rights for my people. But I wonder—who *are* 'the people'?" She looked anxious, intense, and spoke as if they were continuing a conversation broken by her leaving to use the bathroom, instead of by an absence of years. He was afraid to press her, afraid that she would simply vanish. *Don't go, ko'u aloha, my love. Don't go.*

"What do you mean?" His voice was high, and he had to force himself to speak.

"When you plead for a people, for whom do you plead?" She looked down at her white-gloved hands, and Cen saw that the gloves were fastened by small white pearls, which he was sure were real. "Do I plead for their—*our*—bodies, which after all will die? Of course, yes—for adequate food, clothing, education. But that's the least of it. Do I plead for our body as one entire Body, one collection of characteristics which makes us unique? There are so few Hawaiians left now, since smallpox and venereal disease came to the Islands. Do I plead for our old way of life, which was gone before I was born, and, from what I know of it, a good thing, too? It seems that I must plead for something intangible—the life of our soul, as a people—and I don't know what will ensure that life. I don't even know what it *is*. Everything is changing so quickly."

"I don't know either," Cen said. He felt an instant's shame at having abandoned the Homeland Movement.

Tears shone in her deep brown eyes. "It's not just that the land is being stolen from us by the *haole* businessmen," she said. "They did that everywhere they could in the whole world, everywhere they went where the idea of private ownership was a foreign concept. It's really a battle of *ideas*, you see. But do you know what makes us unique?" Her eyes blazed.

"What?" he asked.

"We set out for the unknown," she said. "And we did it because of ideas, and because the world was a different place for us than for the Europeans. We could *navigate*, you see. We latched onto the stars with our minds and they *pulled* us. Are you finished yet? Shall we walk?"

Cen could barely get his hand held folded up fast enough, wondering how to begin to talk to her. Memes. Genes. The ideas she was talking about had no *names* in her time.

It was drizzling, but her parrot umbrella was quite large, and he held it over both of them.

She was unusually tiny for a Hawaiian, but, after all, she was half Scots. He did not miss a single word she uttered, in her low, cultured voice. She had been tutored in the art of being royal from the time she was born. He had noticed that when he was younger, but he keenly

appreciated it now. She was the only one of their people to go forth and survive, to tap the knowledge of Europe for those seven long years. It was her *own* land that had killed her. Eighteen, he guessed. She had been about that old when she'd come to Washington for the first time.

Her hair frizzed more wildly around her face as they walked. The wind was sharp and cold, and reddened her cheeks; it seemed as if the mist was getting more icy.

"What is it like here, Kaiulani?" he asked. He heard that his voice was desperate, pleading, and he didn't care. How did she *get* here? Could she even answer that question if he asked it? He was sure that she could not. What had she called it? Friends of the soul. What sort of energy was *that*? How could it be defined, mapped, replicated, *used*?

"There are so many Hawaiians here that we're tripping over each other," she complained, in answer to his question. "Washington is full of half-Hawaiians, *haole* businessmen, other *alii*, all trying to get things done their way through the newspapers and at parties with Congressmen. Some want the annexation voided, some want Hawaii to be a state, some want it to be an independent kingdom again. A lot of them are upset that *I'm* here. I met President Cleveland and his wife at a White House audience." He saw her jaw set. "I was bred and educated to both think *and* to charm. I did both. I see that people think of Hawaiians as savages, but they could easily see that I am not."

Easily, thought Cen.

"I'm not sure," she said. "I could cause a revolution in Hawaii. I could unite my countrypeople—but to what end? I've studied the histories of the European countries in great depth. They were the same as the Hawaiians: endless wars, both petty and grandiose." She sighed. "I will get them the vote. When we are annexed, we will at least have the vote."

"I was in the Hawaiian Homeland movement," he said.

When she smiled, she had a dimple. "What is that?"

"Most of the Hawaiians don't vote," he told her. "A lot of them don't even read. Oh, of course, there are senators, college professors—a lot of kind, educated, and hard-working Hawaiians. But many don't participate in the *haole* society. They fish, they drink, they collect welfare. The pieces of land Kamehameha II deeded to them were pie-shaped, remember? To make any kind of a living, you needed the mountain uplands *and* a stretch of ocean too. Some lucky people still have those old deeds, and they go to court and fight the big hotels that think they own the land now. Sometimes they even win. But mostly the Homeland movement is a bunch of angry squatters living in tents on parkland, demanding that it be deeded to them in fact. It's been going on for decades."

Tears ran down her face, and he put his arms around her without thinking, drew her close. She rested her head on his chest and moaned, "What can I do *now*? What *should* I do?" She shook with sobs and he held her tightly, rocked her back and forth, but she would not stop crying. "Kaiulani," he whispered, "I'm sorry, I thought you knew."

"You're all I know when I come here," she said. "I see that things are different. I see that. It fascinates me. *You* fascinate me. But I can never stay long. Never long *enough*."

He looked away from the pain in her face for a second, no longer, and when he looked back, she was gone. Just gone.

After that, he always studied in the cafe of the Arlington Hotel. It was all dark wood and crystal chandeliers, and he had to wear a dress jacket just to sit at a table. During the day he ordered an immense number of too-expensive coffees, and was able to draw out breakfast or lunch to two hours.

Sometimes at night, among jeweled Washington politicians and lobbyists, he sat and drank one solitary beer after another beneath Kaiulani's picture, which had been taken during her visit and which adorned the wall of the bar. When he was alone, he wept, angry, wishing that he had never met her. He felt as if he was losing his mind. Or that he had lost it long ago.

For a few months, he agonized over what he might have said differently, how he could have kept her there with him. Sandra didn't like him coming home drunk, so on those nights he didn't come home at all.

Then, to the bewilderment of his university advisors, he told them that he was quitting.

"You could go *anywhere*," one of them—a short, thin man with an earnest face—told him. Cen sat in a leather chair in his office while cold winter rain streamed down the window behind him. "Harvard. MIT. *Think* about it, Cen. Don't quit now. You have a unique gift for mathematics. Sure, the dissertation process is difficult, but you're one of our youngest, you're only twenty-one." He tented his hands and stared at Cen. Finally he said, "Take a year off. Maybe it will be good for you."

Cen didn't tell him, as he left, that he had no intention of coming back.

What good was it?

He would never have any control over what really mattered to him. And he was beginning to realize that his ideas about the importance of the observer to "theoretical" branching timelines—so real to him—were impossible to prove, given the mathematics of the day. And besides, he didn't *care* about proving anything, anymore.

He would tell Sandra that he wouldn't be back, though he wouldn't tell her that there was another woman.

He wasn't sure there really *was*.

Cen jerked awake and lay still for a moment, wondering what had startled him.

The faint, gray light of Berkeley dawn flared beneath the heavy curtains.

Cen heard rain tap the window, reminding him that he was beginning to hate this sunless, squalid bay, rimmed by factories. The smog was a

lot worse here than in the city. But it was cheaper to live here than in San Francisco.

The kitchen counter was strewn with dirty dishes; a cockroach scuttled back into a hole next to the stove. Yeah, it was raining all right, a regular torrent.

He had hitchhiked out to "sunny California," but couldn't hitchhike across the ocean to Hawaii. He'd taken a menial job—loading for a moving company—and found the money good. He particularly liked the fact that he was much too exhausted after working—often seven days a week, if the work was there—to do much more than turn on the TV at night. Certainly he was much too tired to contemplate anything as absurd as branching universes. He'd been here almost seven months, building up cash for no particular reason. It had seemed like the blink of an eye to him. And in a way, that was good. It was what he wanted.

Cen scrubbed the black stuff in the bottom of the frying pan with steel wool, then finally gave up. It was as clean as it was going to get.

And it was Sunday, he realized, and still no phone call. That meant that there wasn't any work for him today.

A moment's panic rose in his throat, but he grabbed his jacket and pulled it on. He knew of a bar that was open even now. As he left his dingy single room, he felt a weird triumph in the fact that it was completely bare of books, that he owned no computer.

He took BART across the bay and then walked, up and down the hills of San Francisco. He reached the bar he was intending to drink the day away in, but felt no pull and walked past. The sky was not clearing; in fact, it began to rain harder. He settled into trancelike motion. He allowed the usual thoughts about Kaiulani to filter through his mind along with his observations of the weather. It wasn't as if he could *stop* them, after all.

The great puzzle was her death. Those curses and portents couldn't have helped! It seemed that complete helplessness had finally overtaken her. She was like a fine racehorse, tuned and trained for just one task: to rule a country and to rule it well, and to do it with all her heart. She had simply felt powerless.

It took five hours of climbing hills to tire him. And there he was.

In front of the place he always ended up at, the Occidental Hotel. That was where Kaiulani had stayed when she returned to Hawaii from Washington via San Francisco after a second visit. There she met with Liliuokalani, who was still fruitlessly attempting to change things via legislation.

A gust of wind made his teeth chatter. He looked at his faint reflection in plate glass while standing on the sidewalk and realized that, in this bedraggled state, he probably wouldn't be welcome in the upscale restaurant or bar, his usual haunts. But he felt too tired and cold to go home.

He checked in. They didn't seem to mind that he was soaked and that he hadn't shaved. He had money.

The room he walked into was filled with flowers—the orange spikes of

Bird of Paradise, white, fragrant ginger blossoms, Chinese jasmine, and entire bushes of bougainvillea—yellow, pink, orange, red. The room was immensely old-fashioned, because the Occidental was supposed to be utterly authentic, but the wallpaper was fresh and new, and lit with the gentle glow of gaslights. Outside, it was raining still, but he walked to the window and could not see the spacebase lights, and felt a chill. Maybe they were covered by fog.

Yet, when he turned and saw her, she was entirely expected.

Kaiulani shut the door behind her and he saw that her eyes were filled with tears. She smiled and they spilled over. He couldn't speak. She walked to him and held him more closely than Sandra ever had, pressed her cheek against his so that he could feel all her yearning, inexplicably focused on him.

She spoke little that night. She was a virgin, and although he tried his best to be gentle, he was afraid that she didn't really enjoy it very much, yet she insisted on continuing whenever he stopped and tried to talk about what was happening.

Of course, she was gone in the morning. Everything was in the present, the base had reappeared, and the bill was very much present-day.

But the sun was out.

Everything he owned, except his last two days' pay, was on him. But even if it hadn't been, he realized that he still would have taken the cab to the airport, as filled with hope and excitement as he was.

On the flight to Hawaii, he felt as if he'd been caught in strange patterns of energy that he didn't understand for a long time, as if he'd been serving some sort of sentence, and that now he was free. His heart lifted at the sight of his green islands strung out below in the intensely blue ocean, rimmed by turquoise shallows shot by the rays of sunset. He recognized South Point on the Big Island, and tears came when, his face pressed to the window, they swept around Diamond Head past the lights of Honolulu. It had been so long.

It happened in the middle of a Homeland Movement rally. Cen tried not to think that it was taking place on the corner across the street from the Princess Kaiulani Hotel, but despite himself the hotel filled his awareness.

"This is *our* land," the woman yelled for the fifth time. "The hell with them all! The hell with the *haoles*! The Japanese! The American military—"

"We *are* Americans!" yelled the man standing next to Cen.

Just so, Cen thought wearily, and turned.

And stopped.

The rally behind him continued—loud speeches, swearing. He jumped at the sound of a cannon being shot—ceremonial, he knew without turning. Another annexation celebration. It must be after August 12, 1898, for he was in Kaiulani's time. Aina hau, green, lush, filled with flowers and birds, was across the dirt road.

And there she was. He stared, his heart in his throat.

A bit beyond the stone wall, Kaiulani was thin and pale as she bent over a bird-of-paradise plant. Slashes of bright orange bobbed as she cut several of them and laid them on the ground. She wore a black skirt, a plain white blouse, a shawl. A wide-brimmed black straw hat shaded her face.

As he watched, she knelt down and pulled a trowel from the basket at her side, and began poking around in the dirt.

Behind her, the old mansion was half-hidden behind mangos and banyans. Her father had built her a new house in 1897, but he didn't see it—not surprising, considering that the estate stretched out over ten acres. The scent of ginger filled the air, and the raucous cries of peacocks exploded each time the cannon was fired.

He left the ruckus outside and walked in through the gate.

The clink of her trowel in the rich dirt mingled with the rustling of the leaves in the offshore trades. The celebration was still taking place, and he glanced up once to see that American marines were there, dressed in uniforms from the past, carrying rifles. Guarding the public from her.

Kaiulani didn't look up, so he sat down in front of her, crosslegged, on the cool grass. She was only a foot from him. He reached up with one hand and brushed her cheek.

She looked up, and her brown eyes were flat and sad.

"You're much too thin," he said.

Her smile did not reach her eyes. She sat back, resting on her knees, which were folded beneath her, and left the trowel sticking from the dirt.

"What's wrong?" he asked. For his part, he felt that there was plenty wrong, and he felt anger rising within.

"Don't you see the soldiers?" she asked. "I'm a prisoner here. I can't even have a charity event. They think I'm trying to raise money for the resistance." Beneath her cheekbones, her face was hollow.

"Then why don't you *do* something?" he asked.

She shrugged. "Lily—my aunt, the Queen—surrendered. They held her prisoner in the palace. They uncovered some sort of plot. There was fighting on Diamond Head. Hawaiians were killed. They were going to try her for treason. They threatened to kill her."

"Yes, but why don't *you* do something?"

"She keeps advising me to do nothing—not to accept any kind of ceremonial station, because I would only be used to bring the Hawaiians into line. Not to take an opposition course and cause more bloodshed. She's right." Her voice was bitter and old. "I never had any real power. I was never anything."

"You're something to *me*," he said.

She looked up, and he was surprised to see that her eyes were filled with gratitude. "Didn't you *know*?" he asked.

"I hardly ever see you," she said.

"Whose fault is *that*?" he asked angrily, then stopped almost ready to laugh.

"Look," he said, "How do you think this happens? Us seeing each other."

"I think," she said slowly, "that it has something to do with the bones."

"What bones?"

"Kamehameha's bones," she said. "Didn't I tell you? I'm sure I did. The *kahuna* used them to curse my mother and she died. He cursed me, the daughter, too. 'With vision,' my old Hawaiian nurse told me. When my father found out that she'd said that—I was very young, you know, but I remember it—he was very angry and let her go. From then on, he only hired *haoles* to take care of me. He's Scots, you know, and he doesn't believe in any sort of superstition. I used to laugh about it too. And then, I used to be so happy that I could see you that I thought, if this is part of a curse of vision, it's more of a blessing. Now I don't know. It only makes me terribly sad. Not only you. It's—other things too." She shivered. "Everything seems so dark. My life is over, the life I was meant to have. The life of my *country* is over. It's just a colony now, a place to be looted. And I can never see you if I *want* to see you. It just happens. Sometimes. Hardly at all, it seems."

"It has nothing to do with bones," he shouted, jumping up. "It has to do with *you!*" It has nothing to do, the subtext in his mind ran, with wormholes, superstrings, "the observer," or with branching time. Those were only words. "It has to do with *will!* You're not doing what you were born to do!"

She stood too, eyes blazing. "Are you?" she asked.

"You don't know anything about me," he said. "I know—"

"Oh, how do you know?" she shouted. "*What* do you know? You only *think* you know! And don't tell me what to do or who I am! That's all anyone ever has done!"

She ran off across the lawn, and he knew she was crying. He followed, grabbed her shoulder, whirled her around, and held her. "Don't go, Kai," he whispered. "Please don't go. Please don't be angry with me. I need you more than anything. I need this time. I need *you.*"

"Then help me," she whispered, and then the Homeland Movement was back, a long-haired man was ranting on the stage, and Cen had to leap onto the sidewalk to avoid being hit by a bus.

Cen was nursing a Green Maiden, beer number 83 on the international list of 284. He'd been through the list four times, and each time he finished, he thought that from now on he'd just pick the beers he'd liked. But then some compulsivity made him start again . . . number one . . . number two . . . It started to rain, and he relaxed into the sound of the patter on the tin roof, the comforting, glowing neon. Everything was the same here, since when he was a kid and his mom sent him down here to drag Dad home. Even the bartender, Kyo, was the same, only now he was middle-aged.

"Does it ever stop raining around here?" The guy next to him asked Kyo.

Kyo snapped his white towel around a glass he'd fished from a tub of water. His face was burnished and mottled. Cen couldn't ever remember seeing him smile.

"You think this is bad?" asked Kyo. "Back about twenty years ago, when we had so many workers to build that spaceport over Hickam side, we had a lotta women hanging out over here with nothing to do. Oh, sure, some of them worked on the port, but a lot were just here until that job was over, and there were plenty of delays. They call it the rock, here, and some of them got what we call rock fever. That rock fever's been good to me—it sells a lot of booze. Anyway, it don't stop raining here in Kailua half the year."

Time had taken on that echoey quality for Cen. He knew what Kyo would say before he even said it: "It'd get so bad some of them women would pick up a gun and blow their heads off—"

Cen had broken the Green Maiden against the side of the mahogany bar before he knew it. He held the jagged nub poised over his head. "Shut up," he yelled at Kyo. "SHUT UP!"

The bouncer smashed Cen's head against the bar, slammed him down on the tatami mat, knelt on his back with a heavy knee. Cen retched and smelled sour vomit next to his face on the floor.

"These Hawaiians are all the same," he heard him say.

Cen heard Kyo's shuffle as he came around the bar, then he stared at calloused old feet in weathered zoris.

"Let him up," Kyo said.

"But—"

"Let him up, I said."

Cen staggered to his feet and leaned back against the bar. "Sorry, Kee," he said.

"I am, too," he said. "I forgot. But I don't want to see you in here for awhile, got it? Keep your face out of my bar."

Ten minutes later, Cen was hitchhiking up the Pali road.

Not knowing where he was going, he caught a ride, rode awhile in silence, and then, without knowing why, suddenly told the guy to pull over. He staggered from the car and found the trailhead just inside the trees at the side of the road. It was a narrow, unmarked trail, overgrown and faint.

Yet he knew it was the right one.

He wondered how he had forgotten for so long. He knelt and dunked his head in the cold, rushing stream, and, when he lifted it, his mind was absolutely, painfully clear. Clearer than it had been in years.

He had been ten, and his mother had walked in front of him, very quickly. He stood and began hiking. As he walked, he remembered it all.

Rain swept in a great sheet across the windward side of Oahu and pattered suddenly on the leaves of the koa forest all around Cen, as he and his mother continued to climb. The gusting wind chilled him, and he hugged himself, keeping a close eye on the slippery rocks of the trail.

The shower passed swiftly, leaving the air cold and smelling of damp earth.

"When will we be there, Mom?" he asked, panting.

She walked ahead of him, slim in her khaki thrift shop shorts. She had knotted her plaid cotton skirt beneath her breasts; her back, between shorts and shirt, was brown. Her long straight black hair was loose, and moved with every gust of wind; a few wet strands stuck to her back. She seemed not to hear him.

"It's getting late," he said, more loudly. His legs ached, but she was starting to walk even faster. "Won't Dad be worried?"

She stumbled, said, "Damn," then resumed her stride. "No, sweet *ku-kui*, he won't be worried."

But Cen knew that she and his dad fought a lot, shouted at each other after he went to bed almost every night. After he'd had a few beers, sometimes Dad *hit* Mom. At least, Cen was pretty sure that he did. Where else did she get those bruises? Dad never painted like he used to, anymore, either—paintings he used to sell through small galleries in Honolulu. Not since some *haole* woman critic made fun of him, called him a "primitive Hawaiian" in the paper, and made people afraid to invest. Cen had watched him light that newspaper on fire and toss it into the air, had been afraid when the wind wafted it skyward spread-armed, a ghost which whitened to fragile ash, then fragmented as it tipped the banana tree fronds.

"We don't have to go," he said. "I'm getting cold." He didn't know what she was up to.

She took a narrow trail that forked to the left. Cen snagged a ripe yellow guava as he walked, and rolled the sweet pink insides around in his mouth, munched the seeds. He picked a second.

"Don't eat too many of them, Century," his mother said over her shoulder. She was the only one who ever called him by his whole name. "You'll get sick." How did she always know what he was doing?

They walked along the crumbling knife-edge of the peak for almost a mile, and Cen became terrified that he might slip, fall to the floor of the deep green valley, almost a mile below. Wisps of cloud floated halfway down the face of the near-vertical ridge which curved around ahead of them, cloaked in dense green rain forest.

He concentrated on his breathing, and on what he saw so far below, trying to calm himself.

The valley below the Nuuanu Pali was crowded. Subdivision roads etched minute black paths between squares of the plain white housing where Interspace workers lived; where *he* lived. A blue tile roof caught the sun next to Enchanted Lake, where rich Interspace execs lived.

Not so scary. Beautiful. Interesting.

The path dipped, and they entered a clearing.

They were only a hundred feet below the top of the ridge; Cen decided that rain alone kept a narrow waterfall splashing into the rocky pool

before them. A blast of chilly air beat the ribbon of water for a moment; then it fell straight once more.

"They're back here," his mother said.

"What?" he asked, but his question was drowned by the hiss of water washing stone.

Cen scrambled after her into a narrow, slippery indentation *behind* the waterfall. The scent of cool damp stone mingled with moist, earthy smells. He mimicked her handholds as she angled up, ten, twenty feet, terrified that he would smash into the shallow pool below.

He was bleeding from many small lava cuts when she reached a narrow ledge, sat back on her heels, and pushed aside a thin slab of stone about a foot high. She reached into the cavity with both hands and pulled hard; a long, narrow bundle emerged.

She set it between them.

It was wrapped in crumbling tapa cloth, made from pounding roots until they were supple and flat. Her long brown fingers untied the gnarled vine which held it together, and unfolded the tapa with great care.

Cen's breath stopped.

"Bones?" he asked.

"Go ahead, touch them," she said. "After me, you'll be the last one to know where they are."

He stared, uneasy. "Are they *human*?"

"Kamahameha's bones," she said.

Cen touched them. They were rough and yellow. He felt kind of empty and dizzy. It was weird to think that these old bones were once wrapped in flesh and blood, like his.

"Why do *you* have them?" he asked. He knew, of course, from the genealogy chant, that he was descended from Kamehameha on his mother's side. Sometimes, when his father was yelling at his mother, Cen heard him shout "princess" at her, and then laugh, as if it were a joke.

"Your grandfather was a *kahuna*, a priest," his mother said. "At least one person has known the secret all these years. These bones have much *mana*, much power. At least, that's what they thought at the time." She smiled slightly and glanced at him. "They still do," she said. "Someone must know. Later."

She was quiet as she enfolded the bones within the tapa, a bundle more than half as tall as she was. The man must have been a giant. His bones clunked together in a hollow way. Cen saw that she tried not to make any new creases in the tapa, because every time she did, the cloth, which was like fine brown paper covered with tiny, precise geometric designs, would break.

She wrapped the old vine around it again and tied it. She shoved the bundle into the long, dark hole, slid the tall stone back in front of it, and piled several smaller rocks against that. A bank of ferns drooped over the place, bright green in the gloom of the rain forest.

"That's all," she said.

It was a long walk back to the trailhead where they'd left the car, but she was just as quiet as ever. He asked, "What do you want me to do with them, why did you show them to me?" a couple of times. She just said, "It's a sacred duty," that was all, and didn't speak again.

His dad was in the tiny kitchen when Cen pushed open the screen door, rattling jars in the refrigerator and muttering. He pulled out a beer. The picture of Queen Liliuokalani, some regal-looking old Hawaiian that his mom kept on the wall, jumped when the old man slammed the refrigerator door.

"Hi," said Cen, and smiled. Sometimes it worked.

Today it didn't. "Don't 'hi' me," the old man snarled. "I want to know where my dinner is. Where the *hell* have the two of you been?"

"We went for a walk," said his mother, right behind him. "Don't worry, it just has to heat up." She pushed back her hair, started up the mic, and took some plates from the cupboard.

"A walk, my *ass*," he said, leaning against the doorjamb. "You've got a pretty soft deal here. All you've got to do is cook and clean, and spread your legs once in a while. Once a month, if I'm lucky, *if you feel* like it. While I'm out fixing those fucking robots every day!" His dad upended the beer and swallowed half the bottle. Cen wondered if he should go to his room or just leave the house.

"I *used* to work," his mother said, so quietly that Cen could barely hear her, "before Interspace brought in the Japanese teachers for the Japanese, the Korean teachers for the Koreans, the Czech teachers for the Czechs. You always forget that *you* didn't have to have a job for years. And you don't seem to remember that I sent you to tech school too, and pushed you to *get* that job. Otherwise all you'd do is surf and paint and live off my teaching money. Ha! Do I have the only clear memory around here?" She turned to him, her hands bristling with chopsticks. Her chin lifted. Her eyes were very black.

"It must be great to be so good and so very smart, too," his father snapped back.

Cen's stomach felt funny. It always started this way.

Maybe if he just acted normal, got some juice out, tried to joke around, they'd stop. He went to the cupboard and got out a glass. But he couldn't think of anything funny to say. His mind always seemed to get stuck when they fought.

Cen jumped as his father slammed a cupboard door his mother had left open. "I guess that's what you *think* I did, anyway. Maybe it's good you don't have a job. You spent all the money you made sending this lazy kid to a fancy school." His dad's voice was rising. "I don't see what difference it made. He's pretty dumb, if you ask me. Nothing special about him. He's a little hoodlum. Have you seen that crowd he hangs out with? Smoking *pakalolo* already!"

"I wonder where he gets *that* from?" she asked, setting a dish on the table with odd care.

The chill in her voice made Cen feel very bad. He couldn't deny the *pakalolo*. He took a cold bottle of juice out and started to pour it into the cup he'd set on the counter.

"And why do you teach him all that stupid *Hawaiian* stuff anyway, all those superstitions," his dad continued, in his low, grating voice. "No matter *who* he is, they're useless. Why don't you face it? He's a bad kid."

A vision of Kamehameha's bones flashed in front of Cen's eyes. "Those old superstitions." Dad would *really* be mad if he knew what had made his dinner late. Nervous, he turned too quickly, bumped his elbow against the counter, and tried to grab the slippery bottle of juice.

It smashed on the floor.

"You stupid bastard!"

Cen bolted out the door into the rain, ducking under the upraised arm of his father.

He cried as he ran down the road to the beach, zoris wet and slick and slapping his feet, fists clenched. He was only ten, but tall for his age, and his father was just a little shrimp, living on Primo Beer, dark sweaty quarts of it every day after work, then picking these fights.

When he got to the beach park, he was glad that the rain had kept everyone else away. He dove beneath warm small waves and surfaced further out, lay on his back and kicked hard, staring at the black hole in the mountain across the bay that was going to be the maglaunch. He rocked on the gentle swells, and rain pecked at his face. Saltwater leaked into his mouth, tasting like tears.

It was after dark when he started to walk back home, and he shivered in his wet clothes. Dad would be passed out by now, and Mom would be sitting in the kitchen reading.

But as he got closer to the house, he heard more shouting.

Shit.

The grass he walked across was rough and wet. Cen climbed up on the cinderblock under the kitchen window and peered in through a crack in the blinds.

His mother was standing next to the door to the living room, beside the kitchen table. The glass top was littered with the remnants of dinner—chunks of rice, a bottle of soy sauce, a few scattered shreds of bok choy and bean sprouts. The exhaust fan pushed air out next to him and it smelled like garlic and beer.

"I've been working all these years!" His father. His mother laughed bitterly, but his dad overrode it. "That's right. Paying for the little *bastard* and for you."

"Don't call him a bastard. He's yours, and he's *alii*."

"That old crap. Wake up! That means nothing now. *Nothing*. Less than nothing! *I* thought so, and I was wrong. You think it makes a difference that you're a princess? You're dumb as a post! Why do you fill him with all those superstitions?"

She laughed gently, but something in her laugh made Cen shiver even

more. Or maybe it was the desperae look in her eyes, which he could see even from across the room.

"It *does* mean something," she said. "It means everything!"

Her face looked different in the fluorescent light. She looked older, more regal, her long black hair flowing around her fierce face—the face of a warrior, he thought. The face of someone he didn't even know. Her hand on the table was shaking.

"You're crazy," said his father. "You've ruined my life with this Hawaiian crap!"

"You believed in it once," she said. "When we were young—remember? We believed *together*. Until you started drinking—"

"Yeah, sure, it's always *my* fault, isn't it?" Cen couldn't see his father's face, but he knew the sneer—the curled lip, the terrifying, cold eyes. "I'm sick of you hounding me!"

He shoved his wife in the chest with the flat of his hand; slapped her face so hard that the sound rang out in the still night, slapped her again, and again.

Call the police, said the voice in Cen's head, but he couldn't breathe. He tried to shout, but his throat squeezed it to a low, hoarse sob.

"Stop it!" she said, her voice ragged. "Stop, I'm warning you, I've had *enough!*"

Instead, he took another menacing step toward her.

She stared at him, her face twisted, tears running down it, and fumbled in the pocket of her smock.

Hand shaking, she pulled out the dull black gun they kept in a dresser drawer.

"No!" screamed Cen.

He jumped down and tore around to the front of the house. He tried to yell for help as he ran, hoping their Russian neighbors would hear, and that they would understand, but his voice sounded far away, like somebody else's.

He slammed through the screen door and rushed over to his struggling parents. He leapt onto his father's back, screaming and pounding with his fists, then shifted and reached for the gun.

He managed to get his hand on one of theirs, he didn't know whose, and he started shaking it hard, trying to loosen its grasp on the gun.

His arm was twisted, then felt as if it had been wrenched off as the gun exploded.

His father roared, turned, and with one arm sent him flying across the room. Cen's head hit the edge of the table and he lost consciousness.

When he opened his eyes, his head hurt like hell and his entire body ached. Especially his arm. He reached up and felt where it hurt: sticky.

He jerked upright.

His mother was crumpled onto the floor. A halo of blood was splattered onto the wall around her head.

He sat up and vomited onto the floor until his heaves brought up nothing, then leaned back against the cupboard, exhausted, not looking

at his mother but at a pattern on the floor tile: white, crisscrossed by pink lines which formed diamonds. Blood had puddled in one of them, and his eyes began to follow the narrow, twisty convolution of red which led into it.

Then he hunched forward and hugged his knees.

He wondered why he felt so calm, and where his father was. Maybe he thought that Cen was dead too. Maybe he'd come back to make sure. He should run. Now.

But he didn't seem able to get up, not just yet. A slight, slow trembling moved through him, peaked, and subsided, as if he had caught a sudden chill.

He finally rose, covered with goose bumps, and turned on the faucet. He looked at the water for a minute, trying to remember why. He flared the stream with one finger.

Slowly, he washed the place on his head which burned, and washed his face until the red rivulets no longer swirled across pitted white porcelain.

Face dripping, he reached up and took his mother's tin box from the window sill. She kept a little money in it, and a few other things. He stared out the window.

There was no reason to call the police. There was nothing they could do now.

The memory of the gun's coldness flashed through him, and he realized that he didn't know whether or not it was still there, and that he didn't care.

He turned, looking very carefully only at the chipped blue knob on the screen door. Night sounds filled the house. The ragged banana trees outside the window clicked in the wind, sounding like rain. He reached up with his left hand and turned off the light over the sink, still staring at the doorknob.

He walked toward it, holding the tin to his chest.

"Damn you, Kaiulani!" Cen said, his legs aching. He raised his eyes from the trail and gazed about. He was high on the mountain, and he didn't even remember getting here. A cold, misty breeze ruffled the tree-tops. He lifted his hand and brushed his face. It was wet from the last quick shower. Or from tears.

He shivered. His chest hurt. He began to walk, but his legs felt very heavy. He trudged upward, *knowing*.

Knowing that he had killed his mother.

And knowing that Kaiulani was not real.

She was not even a *ghost*. He had made her up entirely, perhaps from stories his mother had told him, perhaps from something he'd learned when he was in school so long ago. Couldn't people do that, split their mind, hallucinate?

And why should the *bones* be real, either? He had made that up, like he'd made up Kaiulani, to make himself feel better, to have one good thing in his life. He couldn't trust anything he *thought* he remembered,

could he? He meant to laugh, but it was a harsh sound, pulled away by the wind: funny how his mind could twist things around. Yeah, pretty damned funny.

Except that the blood was real, and that he had killed his mother.

All that stuff his father had said, about him not being *alii*, about it not mattering anyway, even if he was—that was what was true. He'd invented that bone story and hugged it to him, to keep himself from thinking about the truth. He had made the whole world into a ghost to keep from remembering. This mountain, this gentle rain, the sweet smell of hidden jungle flowers—all phantasms, like Old Hawaii. Unreal as his imagined destination, or all his crazy ideas about time and space. When he was a kid, he'd run around on these mountains like a wild goat with gangs of childhood friends, playing Hawaiian, playing Chiefs, playing The Olden Days. That was the only reason he knew where this trail was, and it led nowhere special. It was time to go back. Time to get *real*.

Then he rounded the bend and stopped.

A delicate waterfall drifted down the face of a high cliff and shattered to foam in a tiny pool. Fairylike white flowers bloomed from black lava rock.

He wanted to turn and run.

What he saw was a shimmering curtain which he could easily rend. It would all turn to dust if he dared to look too hard, a fragile and ephemeral decoy of beauty sent by the darkness in mockery of what he, Cen, really was: a murderer.

Yet, he realized as he stared, he *did* remember. For some reason. This was the place he could come to at night, after he woke sweating from dreams of blood, and hug to himself. If he dared to go further, could he bear to lose this solace, this idea that somehow he was *someone*?

Why not?

He might as well lose everything at once.

He walked across the clearing and leaned against the wet stone, pressed his body against it, raised his arms.

His fingers entered hollows which seemed to reach out for them. He moved like a spider across the face of the rock.

The rock was real. He could feel it. Just like he had felt the cold steel of the gun just before it killed his mother. If only he hadn't *fought* with them—

He sagged against the rock, nestling himself on a shallow shelf, and cried.

He saw his father, crosslegged on the lanai, painting, cursing when the mimosa flowers littered the air like pink butterflies and landed on his work. He remembered his proud presentation of money to Cen's mother, not once, but for several years. Cen felt the darkness and alcohol to which he'd retreated when that big-shot New York art critic laughed at him and his Hawaiianness, even though his wife had told him that it was nonsense.

A sensitive man, Cen realized, his face wet, his cheek pressed up

against the rough lava. A bitter man, caught between his wife's idealization of old Hawaii, his own artistic dreams, and the necessity of living in the present the *haoles* and the changing times had made. Alcohol and ignorance had killed his mother.

"Not me," he whispered.

"Not ME!" he shouted, and it echoed through the small clearing and rolled down the mountain into the misty rain forest.

Cen reached fiercely for the next hollow in the rock. "Not real?" he muttered, panting. "Just a ghost? Just stupid superstition? We'll see, Dad. We'll see."

Excitement and fear filled him like a fluttering of tiny yellow o-o birds in his stomach as he reached the shelf. The large rock grated as he pulled it across the stone shelf. The waterfall roared in his ears. His hands shook as he pushed the rock aside and reached inside.

"*Alii*," he whispered, and slid the rough package out.

The last hands to touch it had been his mother's.

Cen sagged back against the rock, pulled his legs up to his chest. Gladness filled him like light, and he gasped with laughter and shook with tears.

"You were *right*, Princess Victoria Kaiulani! Maybe I *am* worth something, after all!"

He felt as if she were next to him, watching.

But was it Kaiulani?

Maybe, instead, it was his mother.

Maybe she could rest now.

He unfolded the old tapa cloth and revealed the bones which had haunted his childhood dreams. As he touched them, he *knew*: time shimmered from them in a special way, infecting alternate times, linking with universes which might or might not be real, depending on the fleeting glance or the long engagement of the observer. Hawaiian magic. Which one day he might dissect, prove, commit to mind and paper.

Time became for him so fluid, and so very beyond anything that he could possibly comprehend, that he may have sat there holding the bones for minutes, or maybe for hours, holding them as tightly as one would hold one's last—or first—shred of reality.

Perhaps he felt the power coming from them just because they *were* real. Maybe it was just that they validated him, made him strong in a way he never had been before. The past slid in behind him as if it were an alternate past: the past he had tried so very hard not to see. Perhaps so hard that it had made him crazy.

No. For the first time, he thought not.

For the first time in his life, he felt utterly real.

He panicked, counting the days. He had so little time. In old newspapers, he had found the day of the parade he had seen. It was only a month before Kaiulani died! And he had wasted most of that time drinking.

He took the first flight he could get to the little airport on the Big Island's Kona coast. Rented a car, and drove.

Up through the rolling emerald hills which were the volcano's flank, up toward the ranch where she had met her death, his heart twisting within his chest. Mist rolled down from the heights, as it had that day when she had been caught in the rain while out riding. He rolled up his window and turned on the heat. It was cold up here on the mountain. At 5,000 feet—and almost 14,000 at the summit—the slope of Mauna Kea was much colder than it ever was on Oahu. Much colder than an Oahu woman caught in the cold rain might be able to stand. In the winter, the slopes on these high volcanoes filled with snow skiers.

There were no truly accurate records of the trail she had taken on her last ride. Only that she had passed by an old *kahuna* who she claimed had cursed her, she who should have been the next queen, as the agent of old Hawaii's demise. Cursed her to death with a curse so powerful that she simply lay down and died, even though the doctors said there was no real reason, that it was just a simple cold. They had put her on a boat and returned her to Aina hau and her doctors in Honolulu, but it had been too late.

Cen wanted to catch her here, if he could. While she still, maybe, had a choice. By god, he didn't care what happened—he would twist time for her and more, if that was possible. He could make her stay *here*. Here, in *his* time. He knew it, with the certainty of a mathematical proof. He was on the verge of understanding, a place which was very bright. Together, they would figure out how to *use* these bones. If he saw her again, he would never let her leave.

He whipped into a pullout, hands sweating. He was about three miles from the main house at the Parker Ranch, which was now open to tourists, with an art gallery and everything. He wondered if there was a little plaque there that said Kaiulani Slept Here. Kaiulani Decided To Die Here.

He gripped the steering wheel with both hands, rested his forehead on it, and cried. "I must have been born under an unlucky star," he whispered, and then, "No!"

He ran up the trail for an hour, then ran back to the car. After that, he drove to the ranch and took a tour of the house, feeling like a zombie or at the least a very crazy man, peering around corners until the guide curtly told him to stay with the group, please.

And finally, feeling at the very edge of whatever mind might be, he gave up.

He got in the car and drove without much thought.

The road took him to South Point.

Hawaiian chants and archaeological records had it that Ka Lea on the Big Island, the southernmost point in the United States, was where the first Hawaiians had landed in the islands. The *haole* name was South Point.

It had been one of the first sacred sites claimed by the Homelander.

The sea was calm in the afternoon. Below the steep cliff where Cen stood, it lapped at old iron mooring rings driven into the cliff; he saw several small fishing boats bobbing half a mile out. The air was cool.

The waves beneath the rocks where Cen stood played endlessly beneath and through one another, and he saw their energy as a weaving of levels, almost as if each wave were a *time*, and those times intersected one another briefly in that heaving dance, over and over. The waves had a memory, *were* memory itself, the visible form of transmitted energy. What was human memory, anyway, but an invisible wave which somehow invested matter with meaning?

Cen felt as if he had relatively little memory left himself, standing out here at the end of the world, on the most isolated land on the planet. He was a particle of energy riding some current he could never understand, grab hold of, or trace back to its source.

He let go, dove and danced, knew the water as intimately as when he had been a boy in the dangerous Ka Lea currents. Why not, who cared if he was swept away? This was a Point of Death and Life, where spirits came to make their leap to the Otherworld. At times, the sun caught him, then he was pushed below, and interfaced with scaly fish bodies, shimmering and nosing through sheaves of light which wavered on the ocean ledges below in brilliant parallelograms. A school of red akule engulfed him, brushed him with slight touches all over his naked body, and he remembered their appearance was said to mean that an *alii* would die soon. Why would he think of that? He was Hawaiian all right, and as plagued with ghosts as they all had been.

Finally exhausted, he pulled himself out of the water.

The tapa cloth, made of pounded taro dyed with the juice of plants, was brittle. Little bits of it flaked off and were taken by the wind as Cen unwrapped the bones. Where it had been creased, it fell apart, until, when he was finished, the tapa lay in several large pieces.

Cen looked at the bones for a long time; he picked up a long one, which he thought might be the thigh.

Navigator. Attuned to the stars in a powerful way, so powerful that their minds flipped, so that the world, the stars, and the islands moved, not them. Still point on a turning world.

The people who played out the program of the DNA in these bones were populators. Called by the stars, they had set out on journeys which looked to *haoles* to be foolhardy, impossible. Yet, Cen knew, though the trip from Tahiti, a matter of several thousand miles, was not in the category of island-hopping, commerce between Hawaii and Tahiti had been constant. It was not as if they had bumped into these islands by chance, blundered into them, at least not after the first star-minded navigator had returned and communicated their exact position in regard to the stars.

These islands had been the last frontier for white Europe. They'd found

not gold, but whales, and land held in trust by the king for the community: green, lush forests of sandalwood and koa; birds of brilliant feather; land bursting with wealth, that ignorant chiefs allowed to be carted off.

He arranged the bones on the grass in front of him.

"*Uhane maka*," he heard, and turned.

Kaiulani stood there, and she looked tired.

She was not dressed in white, but a simple floral dress. She couldn't be older than twenty-three, when she'd died, but she looked much older than that, much more worn. Cen wanted to hold her, but for the first time ever he was afraid. Best, perhaps, not to disturb her; she looked so fragile and pale, despite her dark skin.

She sat on the grass, and he sat next to her.

"These are Kamehameha's bones," he said.

She turned to him. "I'm very glad to see you," she said. "What are you going to do with these bones, these bones of the dead king?"

"Use them to save you," he said.

"From what?" she asked.

From death, he wanted to say, but his tongue would not move. From a loveless, lonely life. From your universe, which has somehow crossed wires with mine and illuminated my life. I want to pull you across this awful chasm and keep you safe forever.

"Throw them into the ocean," she said.

"Why?"

"That's where they came from," she said. "That's where we all come from. That's where they belong. Old bones," she said. "Old superstitions." She shrugged, looked out at the horizon. "I love it here," she said. "I thought that I could do something for my country," she said, "but the old ones, the protectors of the old customs, the ones who save bones like these, hate me. Without them, I can do nothing." He thought of her in her wide bed, suffocating.

"We went riding this morning," she said, and his heart contracted. The ride in the rain, the ride that killed her. "Up on the Parkers' ranch. It's so beautiful up there, the hills are so rolling and green, greener than Ireland, and the slope down to the ocean is so immense. It almost seems that I can see the horizon's curve, you know? Then we rode into a cloud, and I couldn't see it any more."

She was silent for a moment. "I have so much *energy*," she said. "There's so much I could *do* for my people, if the government would only let me. I have dreams," she said, "And not only of you, Cen." Her face filled with anguish.

"Of what?" he asked.

"I've seen Pearl Harbor," she said, "And Hiroshima. And a lot of things in between. Lots of—of what? The future? Can all these horrors possibly be true? I was *at* these places. Just like I'm here with you. Places in Siam. China. Even Berlin, Paris, London, those beautiful cities where I spent so much of my life." A chill went down his back as he stared at her. He remembered that Kaiulani's mother had decided when *she* was

going to die. He could almost hear Kaiulani's mother's rasping voice: "You will live far away. You will never marry. You will never be queen." What an awful burden for her to carry. How easy to succumb when it seemed as if it would all be true. Kaiulani had seen her own death, close up, bearing down upon her. Hawaiians, it seemed, were cursed with this form of seeing.

"Vision," Kaiulani said, and her voice was hopeless. "It's better not to have vision, I think. Better to know nothing."

"You never told me about—those visions."

"They had just started the last time I saw you," she said. "After I lost all hope. After we lost our country. It was like they were waiting like vultures for me to finally let them in, to let in all the horrors the *kahunas* predicted for me. They were tied in with other horrors too. Before, it was always just *you*. Then suddenly I was everywhere. Seeing everything. I can't eat, can't sleep. It's been getting—worse. Much worse. Sometimes I think that I can't stand it any more, this *seeing*. The future is the same as the past. Nothing but war and exploitation."

"Stay here with me," he said fervently. "You can stay. And *live*. I've found the bones for you. Just for you. *They're* the reason we could see each other, because I held them when I was a child. It must be that. They *do* have power."

She smiled and touched his cheek. "Possibly," she said. "But I think that it's just that you're my very dear friend of the soul. That's more powerful than any other force there is, I think." Yet her face was desolate.

She looked away from him. "I've finally realized, Cen, that there is one thing I can do. Something I can at least try. Something I *must* do. To save my people. To keep these terrible things from ever happening." She laughed wryly. "That is, if *I* can really do anything. And if I can, I must, musn't I?"

"What is that thing?" he asked, not liking the sound of her voice.

"I was betrothed to a Japanese prince when I was very young," she said. "They have lately told me that they are still amenable to this marriage of state. I think that I will marry him. The vision I have must be put to some use. I will *not* lay down and die!"

Cen rose, filled with joy and dread at the same time. "You can't—" he said.

"I can," she said, and already color was coming into her cheeks again. "I must. I have no choice."

"You do!" he cried. "You can stay *here*. With *me*. *Volition* is the key, my love. *Volition*, coupled with vision. Will influences what will be. Not predictions."

She looked up and he saw she was crying. "Don't you see, Cen? Don't you see who I *am*?"

"Don't *you* see?" he shouted. "The Japanese would not be any better for Hawaii than the Americans! Why would you think so?"

"Well," she said then, her voice newly fierce, "Then there must be a

way for me to regain my *own* sovereignty. To solidify some sort of political power. To make a *difference* to my people. No other Hawaiian monarch has known as much as I do about how the world is today. I know politics, history, economics, languages. I know how we can hold our own internationally. We have riches here—the riches they all want to exploit. It's all I think about. There must be some way for me to *use* what I know. There must be a *reason* for me! And if there's not, I have to *make* one!" She stopped for a moment, then spoke. "The old holy ones had a phrase for it. Chanting the universe. Maybe I can chant a new universe for us. Or at least *plan* one. There must be some way."

"Of course," he said. "But what?"

He realized what it was that might work at the same instant that she did—he could see it in her eyes as they stared at each other.

"Take the bones, Kaiulani," he said. She'd brought *clothes* with her across time, across the universes. Why not bones? He laughed wildly. "There *is* mana in them. Much power. I've *felt* it. The old *kahunas* will side with you, and then so will *all* the Hawaiians. They will unite the country behind you, *uhane maka*. As long as they know that you will preserve what matters most to them—the life of the land. How does it go? What Kamehameha III said? *Ua mau ke ea o ka aina I ka pono*. 'The life of the land is preserved in its righteousness.' *You* are the rightful ruler of Hawaii, in every way, Kaiulani. *You* can preserve the land." With every true and terrible word, he was driving her away from him.

Toward her own life.

"There's only one thing." She swallowed. "If I do, if I take the bones, I don't think I will ever see you again," she said. "Taking the bones—that will *change* everything." She knew it. He did too. She looked down at them. "I can't do this." Her eyes filled with tears.

If she stayed here with him, she would never be queen. She would be as good as dead. He knew this. Still he wanted her to stay.

But the thought clicked bright as crystal in him: this is a branching universe. And her will, strong as it is, and her unique position there, can create an entirely new branch.

She could explore, in a new way. She could explore time.

But perhaps her old ones had the explanation which best fit, at least for her: they were friends of the soul, and had somehow found each other. But she had to leave this universe, the universe of her death, the place where he lived, behind.

And he had to let her go.

"You must," he said gently. "I think this is exactly what these bones are for. Why they were saved. Why I have them." He knelt and carefully wrapped the bones in the tapa cloth, positive that whatever the old ones had inscribed upon it would prove to the old *kahunas* that they were the bones of Kamehameha, and that Kaiulani was thus *meant* to be queen. At this instant, their universes were the same, for the very last time. The bones would change all that.

If the *kahunas* believed in Kaiulani, in her love of the land, they would rally the will of the Hawaiians.

And she could rally their minds, deal with the legalities, set up an effective legislature, and beat the greedy Americans at their own game.

Cen finished wrapping the bones, stood, and held the awkward bundle out to her.

It was like throwing his heart in the ocean.

With a cry, she took the bones and clutched them to her chest.

Then she and the bones were gone.

In the bright sun, listening to the surf, watching the giant power windmills of South Point, which receded in a row toward the main body of the island, he sat alone with his thoughts.

After several years, Cen finished his doctorate and married a beautiful Hawaiian nanochemist. They had four girls, very smart and also very beautiful, of whom he was quite proud.

His grand theories about time remained untouched. He worked bits and pieces of those ideas into things that he did, and prospered, as much as a scientist can, working on his papers, getting grants.

But a part of him always felt empty, as if there was an open window somewhere from which came a cooling, sometimes chilling breeze, but which he could never actually find. It was a part of him which was open to infinity, where there were no mirrors, where the pattern did not continue, but skipped, finding no purchase, no surface. He was one tiny being on a globe of thought where gravity barely held.

He remembered, always, the time it had let go.

He was in his fifties when, one day, he went for a two-mile hike out to Kaena Point.

It was a long hot walk along the old railroad bed, where dirt had fallen into the ocean below in places, leaving only moldering crossties and a treacherous path. After an hour, he was at the point.

Sacred Kaena, hot dry desert sticking like a sandy tongue into deep currents, strewn with enormous boulders, riddled beneath the cliffs with tiny hidden coves. Beaches ten feet wide where surf thundered and then was caught a few yards from shore by coral ledges, where water lapped crystal through tidepools, filling and receding, filling and receding, the breath of a blue goddess.

Honolulu was not visible from here, only the Makaha coast, its dry mountains changing instant by instant as broad swatches of sun lit the valleys and then vanished behind cloud. It might be two hundred years ago.

An old woman was standing in front of the sun on the rocks. She was only about fifteen feet away, and about six feet above him, and she was gazing out over the sea in the direction of Kauai, which Kamehameha's war fleet had set off for twice and been destroyed by storms both times, so that he never conquered Kauai, but got it by treaty—the Kauai chief being afraid that his luck wouldn't hold the next time.

She was very thin. Her head blocked the sun so that her face was dark, and a white nimbus stood out around it. He could see the elegant lines of her collarbones as they angled in from her shoulders. She wore a long *holoku* patterned with repeated brown figures, like tapa.

Cen watched her crouch; one strong hand grabbed hold of a coral knob. She jumped down in a fashion nimble for one who appeared so ancient.

She walked toward him slowly, bending once to stick her finger in a tidepool and smile. Probably some scuttling crab.

Then she looked at him directly and settled, her *holoku* drifting around her feet as she hugged her knees. "Aloha," she said.

Cen's greeting caught in his throat. She was the memory of this sacred place, maybe. He'd read that Kaena was where souls leapt to the next world; a place where the spirit and the real worlds mingled. Nobody looked this way, so regal, so enchanting even though so old. Nobody real.

She tilted her head. "I'm real," she said, and he shivered as salt spray speckled him.

"I am, too," he said, and they both laughed. "I just didn't think I'd see anyone today. Way out here."

"I know," she said.

"What do you mean, you know?" he asked.

She settled back against the rock, stretched out her legs, closed her eyes. "The sun feels good," she said. Then she stretched out her arm, let her hand lay open on the sand next to him. "Hold an old lady's hand," she said. "I feel very lonely today. Sometimes I do, sometimes I cannot help it. And even though I know better. Now . . ." her voice trailed off, and her mouth curved in a slight smile.

In her voice, he heard a familiar tone. He grasped her hand tightly, and strength flowed into him.

He knew, but dared not say so, then.

He stared out at the glittering ocean. The sun blazed, and he closed his eyes, going back, back, back, as he did in the best times, and something in him healed.

When he awoke, he was alone. The tide was licking his feet and had wiped her footprints away. All his unasked questions—did Hiroshima still happen, in her universe? Or something *worse*?—did not seem to matter.

She had been real. And she had come to him.

The wind dried his tears as he walked back toward the mainland, the lights of little Makaha town shining like stars in the warm, perfect night. ●

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by Erwin S. Strauss

August is the month for many national con(vention)s in continental Europe and Japan. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, a sample of SF folksongs, and information about clubs and fanzines, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at Box 3343, Fairfax VA 22038. The hot line is (703) 2SF-DAYS (273-3297). If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. When phoning, give your name and reason for calling right off. Look for me as Filthy Pierre.

JULY 1993

23-25—**ConGenial**. For info, write: Box 44146, Madison WI 53744. Or phone: (608) 215-0272 or 256-8157 (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). Con will be held in: Madison WI (if city omitted, same as in address). Guests will include: Phyllis Eisenstein, Steven Brust, Fred Levy-Haskell. For fanzines & musics fans.

23-25—**Toronto Trek**. (416) 699-4666. Regal Constellation Hotel, Toronto ON. G. Takei, B. Hambly.

23-25—**Orsamwerks**. (407) 488-2822. Holiday Inn O'Hare, Chicago IL. Commercial event. Trek stars.

30-Aug. 1—**TrekCon**. (202) 452-7425. Washington DC. Commercial Trek event. No guests announced.

30-Aug. 2—**CanGames**. (613) 741-2629. Ottawa ON. Gaming meet, with a "family activities" slant.

30-Aug. 2—**MythCon**. (612) 292-8887. U. of Minn., Minneapolis MN. Tolkien and the Inklings con.

AUGUST 1992

6-8—**RiverCon**, Box 58009, Louisville KY 40268. (502) 448-6562. Hurstbourne Hotel, Joe Haldeman.

6-8—**Norway Nat'l. Con**, Box 121, Vinderen, N-0319 Oslo 3, Norway. (472) 144-163 or (472) 711-958.

6-8—**Hungary Nat'l. Con**, % P. Kuczka, Attila ut. 35, H-1013 Budapest 1, Hungary. (361) 122-8519.

13-15—**MacabreCon**, Box 47036, Wichita KS 67201. Family (Downtown) Inn. Burnham, the Killoughs.

13-15—**BaltCon**, % Engholm, Renstiernas Gata 29, Stockholm S-116 31, Sweden. Baltic-nations' con.

14-15—**WinnCon**, % O. Mulin, 69 Donald #6, Kitchener ON N2B 3G6. (519) 743-9485. Waterloo ON.

19-22—**Comic Con**, Box 128458, San Diego CA 92112. (619) 491-2475. Conv. Center. Zelazny, Whelan.

20-22—**NecronomiCon**, Box 1320, Back Bay, Boston MA 02117. Danvers, MA. Lovecraft's Cthulhu mythos.

20-22—**SuboniCon**, Box 37257, Albuquerque NM 87176. (505) 266-8905. 25th annual. Old-line con.

21-22—**Japan Nat'l. Con**, % Nagato, 11-19 Oimazatonishi, 3-cho. Higashiari-ku, Osaka 573, Japan.

SEPTEMBER 1993

2-6—**ConFrancisco**. (510) 945-1993. Moscone Convention Center, San Francisco CA. \$145 at the door. WorldCon in SF.

SEPTEMBER 1994

1-5—**ConAdian**, Box 2430, Winnipeg MB R3C 4A7. (204) 942-3427 (tax). WorldCon. C\$95/US\$85.

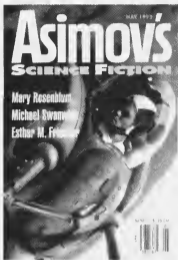
AUGUST 1995

24-28—**Intersection**, Box 15430, Washington DC 20003. Glasgow UK. World SF Convention. US\$85.

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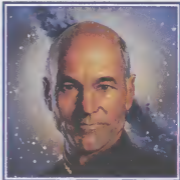
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